

NICKY AND THE LOST TEMPLAR

by Alessandra Nadudvari

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To Nicky

Veritas temporis filia.

[Truth is the daughter of time.]

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS story is about many things, but primarily it is about Nova Scotia. Unless you are Canadian, chances are you have never heard about this Atlantic province. My initial knowledge of it included the following: Anne of Green Gables was an orphan from Nova Scotia, Halifax is where the survivors from the *Titanic* were brought and the *Bluenose* used to be the fastest fishing schooner in the world. My family asked me politely if I had moved to Scotland, and upon hearing that I was in Canada, they wondered if I had seen penguins yet.

No one understood why I had moved so far away – practically to the other side of the Atlantic – to a cold and windswept island on the south shore of Nova Scotia where the ocean roared just a few feet from our haunted house. Because it was beautiful. Because my grandfather had bought a ticket on a ship to America and never got to go. Because this place was a mystery and I could feel it tugging at my sleeve.

As remote as Nova Scotia may sound, in the age of sail it was the last stopping place for ships leaving North America and returning to Europe. This was because vessels followed ocean currents and prevailing winds and could not cross the ocean just anywhere. Such journeys were always perilous due to inclement weather, sharp rocks hiding underwater and (later on) pirates or privateers preying on merchant vessels.

One such notorious pirate, Captain William Kidd, admitted to having hidden a treasure in Nova Scotia (then a scarcely populated place north of Boston). He was finally captured in 1699 – but not his hoard, naturally giving rise to speculations. When a young man named Daniel McGinnis found a strange round depression on Oak Island in Mahone Bay, those old stories about a pirate treasure were rekindled. McGinnis was followed by many other men attempting to get to the bottom of what became known as Money Pit. All were mysteriously unsuccessful in their endeavours.

What was supposed to be a simple job of digging through layers of dirt proved to be a battle against the sea whose salty water kept flooding old and new shafts alike. Had cutthroat pirates been this sophisticated? Artifacts found on Oak Island and Shut In Island (such as an old leather shoe or shards of pottery) point to the colonial era's Spaniards. Everyone would be happy with that explanation were it not for a carbon-dating test performed on coconut fibre from Oak Island that came back as 13th or 14th century – too late for the Vikings of Newfoundland (1000) and too early for Christopher Columbus (1492). Who would have had the capability and a good reason to come to Nova Scotia at that time?

Enter the Knights Templar, a legendary order of warrior monks who were fleeing France in 1307, leaving behind them an empty treasury, their Grand Master Jacques de Molay and hundreds of their brethren to certain doom.

They say the Knights Templar did not have a fleet capable of crossing the sea. Yet their ships left La Rochelle just before the massive arrest organized by their biggest debtor, Philip IV of France. They say the Knights Templar did not have any big treasure worth

hiding. Yet they were richer than kings and the Catholic Church, being large landowners and bankers to the noble families of Europe. They say the Knights Templar did not excavate under the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Yet in 1867 Captain Charles Warren's team of the Royal Engineers discovered a tunnel under the Temple Mount dug by the Templars. They say the Knights Templar had no ancient or advanced knowledge obtained in the Middle East. Yet they helped build Gothic cathedrals astonishingly perfect in their sacred geometric design. The Templars had secrets that continue to echo faintly in the drafty corridors of human history.

If I had a time machine, I would set it for the year 1307, when the Knights Templar were struck down at the height of their power and when the French king raided their treasury and found that all of the deposits had been withdrawn. Next I would set it for 1398, when Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, allegedly sailed to North America, his grandson William Sinclair decorating the family's Rosslyn Chapel with stone carvings resembling Native American plants in 1446. But above all, I wish I could talk to the tribes who might have seen any such strangers come to the rocky shore of Nova Scotia.

Sitting on the other side of the island, with the surf crashing against the blackened granite below, I felt those loose and seemingly disconnected threads in my hands. L'nuk. Vikings. Templars. Henry Sinclair. Spaniards. Captain Kidd. Anne of Green Gables. Us. Could we all fit into this story? I did not need to glance over my shoulder to see that they were there. Two ravens, as black as midnight against the soft blue sky, and our cats who alone can see the resident ghost crossing the darkness beyond the circle of light. I closed my eyes and started weaving.

Imagine an island barely visible in thick fog, where the last of the lost Templars refuses to yield to the laws of time, awaiting the one who is worthy ...

CHAPTER 1

1307, northwest Atlantic

IT was a rare day without wind on the island. Autumn had been walking among the trees, leaving a riot of red and yellow in her wake. Long stretches of pine, fir and spruce remained green, as did the grass, at least until the first frost. The air smelled deliciously of sea and tree sap. To the north, pewter clouds were gathering, promising snow. To the south, the sun was radiating cheer and warmth, unperturbed by the change of seasons.

A man was standing on the shore with his feet firmly planted on a slab of granite. He had a long dagger strapped to his hip and a knife tucked behind his belt. The leather tunic he wore had extra padding on the left shoulder, giving him an uneven look. His hair had grown long again, as had his beard, and since he was not into braids, he would have to trim both of them soon.

He shielded his eyes and looked intently toward the southeast. If a ship were to enter the bay, it would come from that direction. Today the horizon was empty, which was disappointing. But Jean Baptiste de Saisi was not one to despair. A ship would come next year; he was sure of it. In the meantime he could explore the mainland and map the coastline or add more booby traps at the treasure sites.

The thought of the treasure brought a wry smile to his face. The king of France had been scheming to get his hands on the fabulous wealth of the Knights Templar for a long time. When their Grand Master

received some rather disturbing reports, a decision was made. They would relocate everything somewhere safe, as far away from Paris as possible. But nowhere known was safe. One of the knights, Sinclair, suggested a mysterious land far to the west, and so to the west was where they sailed. It would have to be done in stages, without arousing suspicions. Jean Baptiste had come in the second wave, on a ship that carried an entire library of priceless scrolls.

Gold was easy to hide. It could go underground and even underwater because it did not corrode. Scrolls were a different matter entirely, and these were so ancient and delicate that they had to be handled and preserved with utmost care. At the suggestion of the Order's alchemist, they were sealed in clay jars filled with mercury. If kept dry, away from fire and earthquakes, they should last for hundreds or even thousands of years.

Jean Baptiste doubted the king of France would be interested in scrolls. He was heavily in debt and needed all the gold he could get. But his hands would close around nothing but air. Jean Baptiste had a foreboding that the vengeful monarch would not take it kindly – not after they had declined his request to become one of them and join the most prestigious and powerful order of all times. They answered to no one but the Pope, who, if the secret reports were true, was slowly becoming the king's puppet.

They could ... what ... run? Stay in the west? The proud knights could never face such humiliation. No, they would stand their ground and fight.

Were they fighting at this very moment? Is that why they did not return for him?

He studied the horizon once more and saw nothing but grey sky blurring into one with grey ocean. What

a strange fate his was, to become stranded here, so far from home, guardian of a secret treasure. Jean Baptiste sighed. He needed to occupy himself with something or he would go mad. For one, there was the pressing need to survive the oncoming winter.

The wind was picking up, whipping his hair around his face. Jean Baptiste could not make a ship appear, but he could pray for his brothers and the success of their mission. He went down on one knee and bowed his head. His quiet words unrolled like a banner in the relentless wind. Perhaps someone in heaven was listening.

In a nearby fir tree a raven as black as midnight was eavesdropping. It was Yngvi of Clan Rune, who claimed to be descended from the god Odin's ravens, Hugin and Munin. Yngvi's grandmother reminded him of his illustrious ancestry on a regular basis. He had no qualms about spying on everyone, including Jean Baptiste. Was it not his duty to see and to report, just like Hugin and Munin had done?

Yngvi knew he could just ask the mysterious man anything he wished to know, but it was far more interesting and challenging to ferret things out. For example, he knew where a certain squirrel had hidden its nuts for the winter – just like he knew where Jean Baptiste and his associates had hidden theirs. The precious hoard, however, was protected and sealed. There could be anything down there, Yngvi mused – magical runes, ancient spells or even echoes of a curse.

They were strange things, words. And, stranger still, Clan Rune knew lots of them. All ravens could speak common raven, of course, but how many could discourse in Old Norse or L'nui'sin? None outside Yngvi's clan – at least not in this part of the woods. These ravens were special. And Yngvi was further enhancing the clan's

reputation by learning a new language. He struggled with it, but it was only a matter of time before he could speak through his beak “like a born Parisian,” whatever Jean Baptiste had meant by that. He shook himself out of his reverie. It was getting nippy, and he blew on his toes to stay warm.

When Jean Baptiste stood up and brushed off the grass and sticks from his pants, the raven swooped down and circled around him. The sun’s rays made his black feathers shine blue. He beat his wings leisurely to prepare for landing and, slowing down, grabbed for purchase.

“Yngvi, my raven friend!” Jean Baptiste smiled. “That was quite the dramatic entry. You are as quiet as a shadow.”

The raven gave no reply, but the knight could tell he was pleased with the comment.

“I hope you can perch in greater comfort now.”

Jean Baptiste waited for Yngvi to sink his claws into the shoulder pad. They were like knife points, and he bore their scars from earlier encounters.

“Let’s walk. I want to look at the island to the north.”

Yngvi knew it was the one that housed the knights’ treasure. He had made discreet inquiries with some crows farther down the shore, and they had confirmed that the men had been busy in more than one place. This island, however, was the only one near which they had left a guard. It had to be something important. Knowing about it made Yngvi’s beak tingle. He and his cousins had been about to do a reconnaissance when an insufferable eagle decided to move to the island, making it off limits to the ravens. *For now.*

Presently, he was enjoying the ride on Jean Baptiste's shoulder. They set out on a narrow path winding among solitary rocks and heath the colour of rust.

"So what is new in Seal Cove?" Jean Baptiste asked. He knew the ravens lived in the forest behind the cove even though they frequented this island as well.

Yngvi sifted through the thousand new things from this morning, such as air currents, temperature and food availability. He chose what Jean Baptiste might find interesting.

"An eagle on the island to the north," he said levelly.

"How fitting that an eagle should live there! But you are not enthused?" the knight shot him a sideways glance.

Yngvi puffed up his feathers and ground his beak. He thought about how the ravens would have to chase the eagle away from their nests come springtime and how much harder it would be for smaller birds to compete for food. He searched his ever-growing vocabulary for the French word for a bully.

"What do you call a swift, unexpected death from above?" he hazarded.

"A good one," the knight nodded his head firmly. He believed in a warrior having an honourable end, not one at home in bed. But he had an inkling it was not the same if you were a small furry creature and your last word was *squeak*.

"Does the eagle make you worried, Yngvi?"

"Handsome, fast, arrogant, aloof ... What do you call that?" the raven answered with a question.

"A born leader," Jean Baptiste answered. "Why, this eagle is a king of all birds." He made an all-encompassing gesture with his free hand.

Yngvi's raspy voice rose by an octave.

“We ravens never voted for him. This ‘king’ could not win a single riddle contest, let alone spell his own name,” he said acidly.

Jean Baptiste raised his eyebrows.

“Can you spell your name, Yngvi?”

The raven replied, indignantly: “I am Yngvi of Clan Rune! I can spell my name and write it at midnight with my wings tied behind my back.”

He did not add that his grandmother had actually made him do that on several occasions.

“Show me how you write your name.” Jean Baptiste wanted proof.

They were almost through the forest now. The sound of the surf crashing against big rocks was getting louder. Yngvi felt a wave of relief. While he enjoyed riding on Jean Baptiste’s shoulder, seeing all those tree trunks struggling for space and light made him claustrophobic. He was a free spirit from the sky, and he needed to see its blue infinity on a regular basis.

Jean Baptiste took a few more strides, and then they were on the shore. There was a small beach, and the raven could guess that was where he would be asked to write his name. Without prompting, he took off and, wings outstretched, landed softly. There was a flat patch of sand begging for someone to doodle in it. Jean Baptiste watched in polite silence as Yngvi took great care drawing strange symbols with his big toe.

When the raven had finished scribbling, he hopped onto a rock and started grooming himself. Jean Baptiste came closer and scrutinized Yngvi’s name. In his life he had seen many different types of writing – even hieroglyphs and petroglyphs – but none of them resembled these.

“What kind of symbols are they?” he asked finally.

“Why, runes,” Yngvi said matter-of-factly and dislodged the last grain of sand from his feet.

The knight bent down and traced the runes, committing them to his memory. *Runes? Riddle contests? Where had these ravens come from?* Jean Baptiste shook his head.

“I am speechless, Yngvi. Your name looks very mystic, very beautiful.”

Yngvi tried not to look smug. The runes were magical symbols obtained by the Norse god Odin from the well of wisdom under the world tree Yggdrasil. He had given up an eye for them too. And while he was nursing his empty eye socket, a pair of ravens that happened to be sitting in the tree had taken a quick drink from the same well. Too smart now for their own kind, they were left with no choice but to enter Odin’s service. They flew over the world, watching and listening, and reported everything back to the god. Such glorious times!

Jean Baptiste gestured for Yngvi to perch on his shoulder again. A wave came rushing ashore, washing over the runes, smoothing the sand as if to invite more writing. Yngvi felt tempted, but his empty belly reminded him that he was rather hungry. He eyed Jean Baptiste’s left ear and gave it an affectionate peck.

“Ouch, no biting of ears, please. Here, you can have this.” A piece of flat bread was produced and passed to the bird. Yngvi caught it deftly in his beak and chewed in quiet concentration.

Jean Baptiste turned and studied the island ahead of them. It was a massive piece of white rock, forested on one side. Its steep slopes rose from the ocean in a ring of fog. *The vault – the secret archive. It would last forever.*

“Say, Yngvi, would the new eagle attack people if they disembarked on that island?”

Yngvi finished his snack and cleaned his teeth with a claw. He would have to relieve himself soon, but he was too well bred to do it on Jean Baptiste's shoulder. Now, a gull would not hesitate – even that self-proclaimed king of all birds would probably unload himself anywhere, but Odin's ravens had standards.

"I would not go there when the eagles have young ones. But even eagles have to hunt, and I could tell you when this one is away and the coast is clear."

Jean Baptiste thought it would be interesting to have an attack eagle on the island, but the bird was probably wary of humans and would not care about being trained.

"Excuse me," Yngvi flapped his wings and flew out of sight. Jean Baptiste moved on; the raven would catch up with him later. He traversed some big boulders with caution. A sprained ankle or a broken bone was not something he could afford right now.

Rocks, yes. He had been wanting to take a closer look at a particularly interesting rock on the other side of Seal Cove. It resembled a small pyramid. Was it natural or man-made? It would make a good landmark if you knew what to look for, like the oak trees the knights had planted at a decoy treasure pit on another island.

He made a mental note about the things he would do. One, learn runes. Two, investigate the pyramid rock. Three, cut his hair and trim his beard. Oh, how he wished for a hot bath ...

The wind was gusting now, and it was time to return to his home for the winter, a cozy dugout in the side of a small hill. The ocean was getting rough, its heaving surface slate grey, its waves menacing. Two black shapes were gliding on the wind: One would be Yngvi, and the other was probably his cousin. They were headed for

the highest place this side of the island, the top of his hill, which Jean Baptiste liked to use as an observatory.

When he climbed it, the ravens were perching on a pine bough swaying in the wind. Yngvi gave a piercing croak and spilled the news:

“The L’nuk are coming. Cousin Alvis has seen them. They are local hunters.”

Jean Baptiste assumed Alvis was the shy raven that had come with Yngvi. *Eyes in the sky*. He had to make sure they would always be his allies.

“I am grateful, Alvis, for this warning,” he said solemnly. “How many are coming? When will they be here?”

Alvis shifted his weight, and Yngvi inclined his head toward him. Some kind of communication passed between them, although no sounds were involved. Jean Baptiste waited patiently for a translation.

“A small band of 30 in eight canoes,” Yngvi pronounced. “They will be here before the snowstorm. They are armed, but they are not expecting to find anyone here.”

“Understood. I do not wish to fight; however, I must be ready to defend myself.” Jean Baptiste was quickly reviewing possible strategies. Alvis’ forewarning gave him the advantage of surprising these L’nuk. He should avoid violence at all costs. He must have looked troubled because Yngvi fluttered down onto his shoulder.

“Our clan will protect you. Do not worry.”

Jean Baptiste’s weathered face cracked into a smile.

“Where is your sword?” he asked the raven.

“I left it at home.”

“I see. Then what do you propose to do?” the knight eyed the raven with interest.

“I will be your ambassador,” Yngvi said modestly. “I believe I have the L’nuwey medicine man’s ear.” *Figuratively speaking*. Should he mention the tribe’s influential grandmothers?

Jean Baptiste was lost in his own thoughts. He was apprehensive but also intrigued. What did the L’nuk look like? Was the medicine man their leader? What would the other knights say if they found out that a raven had saved his hide? No, he should be prepared in case Yngvi’s efforts failed. He tried to picture a band of locals coming to their familiar island, tired and cold. Instead of settling in and getting something to eat, they would have to sort out what to do with this strange man. What if they thought he was a demon? It could go badly for him. He should shift their attention to something else – something that people from a different culture could understand. A symbol, yes ... That might just work.

“Yngvi, call your clan and meet me here before the L’nuk arrive. I am going to need an eagle.”

With bad weather at their heels, the L’nuk were in a rush to cross Seal Cove and spend a night on the island of talking ravens before moving inland for the winter, into the shelter of thick forests. This year they were late, and, what was worse, they were being watched. An eerie silence fell over the band as they paddled closer in their birchbark canoes packed with provisions and all their belongings. They eyed the trees that grew along the coast. They were full of ravens. Without warning, the birds took off and, one by one, fell into a circular formation. Their cries echoed above the cove like an urgent message.

The men reached for their weapons but hesitated when the old medicine man halted them. Huddled in a bear fur, he was frail and blind, none of which diminished

his powers and influence. If anything, the white surface of his eyes indicated he had an insight into unseen worlds. He pointed to the east and all heads turned in that direction.

A young eagle was beating his wings majestically, almost leisurely, as if inclement weather did not hold any sway over him. As he got closer, the ravens dispersed, settling into treetops once again as a captive audience. Would the king of all birds do as he had been instructed? Yngvi fervently hoped so. Wait, wait ...

“Now!” he hissed into Jean Baptiste’s ear. The knight stepped forward to the edge of the hill, making himself visible to the L’nuk below. He was carrying the Beauseant, his order’s battle banner, which showed a crimson cross in a black and white field. He stuck it in the ground and stood next to it, hand on his sword, its length and weight reassuring. Jean Baptiste prayed he would not need it that day. He prayed the eagle would land on the banner and not on top of his head. He wondered if he should have worn his helmet, but it had rusted and he could hardly see anything through the slits.

Rigid in his boat, the medicine man leaned toward a young woman dressed in moosehide in front of him.

“How many men do you see?” he quavered and touched the white streak in his raven-black hair with a bony finger.

“Just one pale demon, Grandfather, with hair growing all over his face,” she replied truthfully.

“No men burning in a fire?” he asked to be sure.

“Not today, Grandfather.”

The medicine man adjusted his temporal vision and refocused his eyes. The girl was right; there was no fire. Yet. He turned his attention on the so-called white demon. Just a man, he could tell, because as black as the

ravens were, Clan Rune would never have sided with a dark spirit. And there was Yngvi, poised on the stranger's shoulder like a bad dream, beak slightly open, ready to whisper secrets into an eager ear.

The wind tore at the fluttering banner that due to either material fatigue or some help with rusty scissors had ripped from the wood and would have been lost had it not been for the intervention by the intrepid eagle who caught it deftly in his talons and carried it back north, presumably to line his nest with it.

Yngvi stared speechlessly, as did Jean Baptiste and the assembled L'nuk, now slightly chilled yet still uncertain whether or not the island was safe or lost to them. The medicine man nodded to himself. An eagle was a good omen, but would it be enough to keep the stranger alive? There was no hope for the others – the ones whose destiny held flames. The stranger would need some help to survive the winter storms – something the L'nuk could teach him how to do.

"I am cold," a woman's voice said from another canoe. It belonged to the Elder Grandmother, also huddled in a fur, her face like a shrivelled gooseberry, her eyes brimming with curiosity. "Let's go!"

The medicine man grinned to himself and gestured to proceed and disembark. Perhaps there was no fire burning yet, but he had a feeling the man in white was skilled at starting it. Where there was a fire there would be delicious food ... and a good tale to go with it.

CHAPTER 2

21st century, Nova Scotia

“**A**RE we there yet?” I asked for the hundredth time, fidgeting in my seat. The fidgets had started as soon as we crossed the Saskatchewan border and headed east to Nova Scotia. My father, a filmmaker, had been hired to make a documentary about shipbuilders in the Maritimes. We jumped at the opportunity to get out of our hometown of Destiny (population 1,000) and to have epic adventures by the Atlantic Ocean.

I turned around as much as the seat belt allowed, and my eyes met the steady gaze of Sheba. She was one of the five cats we were bringing along. I could tell she was feeling carsick, and I opened the partition window between the cab of our pickup and the shell on the back to pet her. “We’ll be there soon,” I assured her.

Finally, after over 4,000 kilometres, we exited Highway 103 and entered the land of Peggy. Our old pickup truck followed a narrow, windy road along the coast of St. Margaret’s Bay that was dotted with wharves, docks and art galleries. I saw a fleet of small sailboats but no big schooners. Where was the *Bluenose*? I planned on sailing on the replica of the legendary schooner, among other things.

“Honey, I think you missed the turn,” my mom broke it gently to my dad.

“No, I know exactly where we are,” he replied stubbornly.

“What’s the address again?” She turned to me this time. I consulted our map.

“1111 Talon Island Road,” I chirped.

“It should be right here,” Dad frowned, doubt creeping into his so-far-unshaken confidence.

When we passed the Rhubarb Restaurant in Indian Harbour, we knew we had gone too far. Dad turned us around, and we headed back slowly, keeping an eye out for Talon Island Road.

“There it is,” Mom exclaimed. “It’s hiding behind Peggy!”

We stared at the plywood figure of a young girl in a blowing cape whose hinged arm moved in the breeze with a squeak, beckoning at us to visit “Seaboyers’ Emporium, est. 1800.”

“1800? That emporium must be the oldest building on the island. I thought for sure the earliest structure was built in the 1900s,” Mom said as she thumbed through her tourist guide hastily. “This emporium is not even mentioned here ...”

“It’s probably one of those best kept secrets only known to the locals,” Dad commented. “Like the turnoff to Talon Island,” he winked at me and began turning the steering wheel.

“Watch out!” Mom screamed.

An oncoming tourist bus with tinted windows zoomed by, eager to get to Peggy’s Cove and its famous lighthouse, one of the most visited places in Canada. It, too, was on my to-do list – as soon as we were settled in. Back home, I was a part-time correspondent for *The Destiny Observer*, and a photo of me holding a copy of the newspaper in front of the lighthouse would make the front page.

When the road was clear, we turned left onto Talon Island Road, which led us to a causeway that connected the island with the mainland. At Mom's request, we stopped on the causeway and rolled down the windows to let in a blast of fresh air sprinkled with salt. There was a collective inhale and exhale as three humans and five cats took in the glittering expanse of St. Margaret's Bay.

After a four-day drive, we were finally here!

"It's beautiful ..." Mom said reverently.

The soft purring that came from behind me suggested the cats concurred. Now, where was the house?

Dad resumed our course, and we went around the last bend to our destination, 1111 Talon Island Road.

"I can see it; it's the white one on the left," Dad said. All heads swivelled in that direction. Unlike the bay, the sight of the rental house did not uplift our hearts. It was large and old, with a roof colonized by orange lichens. The black decorative shutters on the sides of the windows gave it a watchful look.

"Is it haunted?" Mom wondered. Her voice shook slightly when she added: "It looks haunted to me. I'm not staying there."

"Too late," Dad replied. "We have rented it for two months. You cannot cancel a lease in Nova Scotia."

"I'm just saying," she shook her head and squeezed my hand. "Don't worry, pumpkin, ghosts do not exist."

"Then what is haunting the house?" I asked. She was not making any sense.

"Probably mice in the walls and a squirrel in the attic," Dad stepped in. "These old houses are perfect habitats for nocturnal creatures."

Hmm ... I knew my mother was scared of mice; she would never touch the ones left as gifts on the doormat by our cats. My father had to take them away and bury

them in our backyard. But was that a reason to turn back after driving across Canada for days and days? There was only one course of action: investigate.

Whatever had initially disturbed my mom was quickly forgotten at the sight of a cascade of pink flowers craftily planted around rocks in the front garden. A wooden walk invited us to follow it to the doorstep.

“How quaint!” Mom exclaimed, clapping her hands.

“We are saved,” Dad said, sounding relieved. “Now, can we move in?”

And so we climbed out of our old trusted truck, stretching our legs and backs. Haunted or not haunted, this house was ours for a while. I could not wait to see my room. I hoped it would be in the attic, preferably quiet and not occupied by rodents. I lowered the tailgate and watched the cats pounce on it. They were not in the least afraid or confused by finding themselves in a strange place. I just hoped there were no predators on the island. While my parents busied themselves with luggage and Dad’s video equipment, I walked to the end of the driveway, looking left and right to see how big Talon Island was. The cats fell into a single file behind me, equally curious about their new territory.

“Hi!” came a shout from the road. I turned around to see who it was and saw a slim blond woman walking a poodle. She waved at me vigorously. I waved back cautiously.

“Hello,” I said as she approached. The cats bristled at the sight of the dog, who strained against his leash, no doubt wishing to give them a welcome chase around the island.

“Are you my new neighbours?” the woman asked. “This is Sir Lancelot. He is from Mexico.”

“Um, we are just here for the summer,” I replied shyly, looking around to see where the cats had scattered. “Sorry, I have to go find my cats.”

“See you around!” she said in that cheerful but slightly maniacal tone of one who is determined to feel positively about life every day. “Watch out for eagles! And foxes!” she called over her shoulder.

Taken aback, I forgot to ask the woman her name. Did she really mean what she had said?

“Eagles?” I muttered to myself.

“It is the owl they ought to fear,” a voice said. A disembodied voice, I should say, because there was no one there. In the shadow of the old house, which my mother had pronounced haunted, I stood all alone.

“Hello?” I managed to say, looking around and only seeing my cats, who were slowly coming out of the bushes. “That was strange. Let’s go inside and get you something to eat.”

For once they obeyed and followed me into the house. I hoped I would still be able to pick my own room and that the decision had not already been made for me without me.

“Your room is the one with the balcony,” my mother announced as soon as she saw me.

“It has a telescope,” Dad said and shoved a stack of linens into my unresisting arms. Then he whispered: “Consider yourself lucky. I get to sleep in a four-poster bed with a saggy mattress.”

“We picked the romantic room,” Mom smiled. “A room with a view. Just like the novel.”

I shrugged, not having read any such novel, and deposited the linens on the bottom step of a steep flight of stairs. Mom pointed me in the direction of the utility room, where I opened a can of cat food and divided

its contents among five famished felines. They gulped it down in record time, licking their bowls clean and eyeing my hands for more.

“Maybe later,” I said. “Let’s go check out our room!”

They fell into an easy trot behind me, and together we climbed the stairs. I noted a linen closet with an antique latch on its white door.

“Shall we take a peek inside?” I asked the cats and lifted the black latch with my thumb. The door opened with a creak, revealing a deep, dark and cozy space inside. The cats rushed in, dividing the shelves among themselves according to a pecking order only known to them.

“Come on, little mateys,” I started closing the door, “there is more to see in this house.”

We passed a bathroom with a giant claw-footed tub that must have been lifted with a crane, it looked so heavy. Perhaps it had been placed here before the roof was finished. Seeing that the toilet lid was up, Samilian the tomcat proceeded to drink out of it, cupping his paw to bring the water to his mouth.

“Yuck! Don’t drink out of the toilet!” I scolded him, but he paid me no attention. Poor thing; he must have been dehydrated. While he drank, Toby the cat jumped up on the counter and sniffed at a pair of porcelain sinks complete with tarnished brass taps. Judging by the floral wallpaper that was peeling in the corners and the scent marks currently being decoded by the cats, this room had not been renovated for decades.

“Now, on to our bedroom!” I commanded my minions and led them down the narrow and rather-dark hallway that had two doors at its end. Instinctively I reached for the large round doorknob on the right

and twisted it, giving the old door a little push with my shoulder.

It was a simple, somewhat-small room in the attic with bare, slanted walls and a warped wooden floor. The far corner on the right was occupied by a cast-iron pot-bellied stove whose black chimney disappeared through the ceiling. For reasons unknown, the stove was surrounded with round pebbles. Some of the stones had dainty flowers painted on them.

“Cool, a telescope ... and a sliding door!” I whistled and tossed the linens onto my bed on the way to the balcony. The door was stuck, but I managed to open it on my third try. The cats spilled out, poking their heads between the railing to assess the height.

“Too far to jump, little ninjas,” I said, knowing full well they would try it anyway. There was a hill and a forest behind the house, hiding a small cove from full view. A white rock resembling a pyramid stood at the edge of its dark waters.

“I think we are facing east. That means we will get the early light in the morning, and we will see the moon first too. What do you think? Do you like it?”

There was a thud. I leaned over the railing to see which cat had jumped off the balcony.

“Henrietta ...”

The chubbiest and friendliest cat of all, Henrietta Sinclair had vaulted the obstacle, scaled down the shingled roof and sprung off a rather-loose gutter, eager to embrace her new-found freedom. Before the others could do the same, I pushed them back inside, sliding the glass door shut. It was easier the second time.

“Right. There is an owl outside that might eat you if you are not careful. It came as an anonymous tip.”

The cats were clearly disappointed, assembling at the balcony door and pressing their noses into it, tails swishing. They were scheming, I could tell, which would keep them occupied while I looked for their sister. Hastily, I made my bed and emptied the contents of my suitcase onto it. There was no closet in my room – only an ancient dresser lined with waxed paper and smelling of mothballs. It would do.

After I put my clothes away, I thundered down the stairs, finding Mom in the living room with her head turned up. She was admiring the blackened wooden beams that ran under the ceiling.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Dad warned her.

“What? I was just looking – that’s all. How old do you reckon this house is?” she changed the topic.

“A hundred years, at least. Look at those indentations in the beams; they are from an adze.”

“The house is very stoutly built; it reminds me of a ship,” Mom mused. “Maybe it was built by a sea captain.”

“Or pirates,” Dad said mysteriously. “Did you notice the vicious iron hooks driven into the beams in the kitchen? Who knows what they used to hang there?”

“And the trap door in the floor ... Did you tell him about that?” Mom was getting excited now. “There is probably a dungeon under the house.”

“Seriously?” I asked, feeling a little uneasy.

“No, just some big rocks in the basement,” Dad assured me. “What’s wrong?”

“Um, nothing. Henrietta is at large,” I shuffled my feet. The cats were my responsibility, and within minutes one of them had escaped.

“How?” Dad asked.

“She jumped from the balcony upstairs and dropped straight down, like a Tibetan tree leech,” I said with a flourish.

“Then let’s go get her. Could she have gone to the beach?” Mom asked the world in general.

“Black Cove beach?” Dad frowned. “That’s the only beach I am aware of. It’s quite famous, actually, at least among divers.”

“Dad, can I go diving?” I jumped at a chance to have my first big underwater adventure.

“Not so fast, buster. But you can help me gather some driftwood. We can use the fireplace tonight,” Dad said.

And so we put our shoes on again and headed outside. We did not lock the door behind us – partly because the lock had corroded from salt air but mainly because this was the Maritimes and we believed the islanders to be good people. Moreover, we would not be gone for long ... or so I thought.

The island road took us farther down to a small wooden bridge after which there was only dirt road leading to an old lighthouse. It was not as impressive as the one at Peggy’s Cove, but it shone its light cheerfully and made a pleasant sight.

“Where’s the beach?” I asked, eyeing a group of granite boulders stretching right and left.

“That must be it; there is nowhere else to go.” Mom sounded a little disappointed.

“I bet there is a nice patch of sand hidden from our view,” Dad pointed and led the way over ankle-twisting rocks slick with water and seaweed. We followed him like ducklings. He was right. A crescent of a beach was tucked between two massive boulders that sheltered it from the sharp wind blowing from the bay. We sat

down, and I was surprised at how coarse the sand was. I rolled it between my fingers and realized that each grain was a piece of a rock that had been washed and smashed by the ocean until it turned into sand. It felt like a lot of work.

I took my shoes off and walked to the edge of the Atlantic. A small wave got pushed ashore, closing around my ankles. The water was startlingly cold, taking my breath away. I would have to postpone my plans to swim and dive until I could borrow a wetsuit. Or was it a dry suit? I had forgotten to bring my long underwear from Saskatchewan, not expecting to need it on a summer holiday.

Behind me, my parents were talking. Dad was trying to persuade Mom to take a boat ride to the large island to the north, which she staunchly refused. She was afraid of deep water.

"But you would have a life jacket," I could hear Dad say. "It's quite safe."

"It's just too deep," she argued. "I can't see the bottom of it."

"That's why you should try snorkelling," Dad persisted.

"I am afraid of the seaweed moving in the water," she said helplessly. "I just know I would drown."

Dad sighed and tried to approach the subject from another angle. Knowing how the conversation would end – with my mother not budging – I tuned their voices out.

Voices ...

Words that had been spoken, like a prayer on the wind, brushing the edges of my hearing. Drawn and unable to resist its inexplicable pull, I turned to face the island to the north.

Shut in ... Shut In Island.

A shadow passed over my head, and I shielded my eyes to watch as an eagle rose on an updraft, its white head and tail gleaming in the sun, wings outstretched like a condor's. Henrietta ... I remembered with some urgency. But she was safe, if unreachable, lying on top of the biggest boulder on the beach, peering down at my mother with polite interest.

"Come down, kitty kitty ..."

Henrietta purred and tucked her tail around her, obviously planning to stay for a while, secure in her knowledge of being too heavy to be carried away by eagles.

"She looks as if she belongs here," Dad said. "I am astounded she is not afraid of all this water," he gestured toward the swelling ocean.

"I don't think she wants down. What now?" said Mom.

"Well, I did not bring a ladder, so she will have to climb down on her own." Dad shrugged his shoulders. "She will come when she is hungry."

Henrietta's amber eyes met mine. *I will be all right*, they were saying. Well, we had not named her after Henry Sinclair for nothing – Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, who allegedly crossed the Atlantic before Christopher Columbus. Or so the legend goes.

"Okay, let's leave her here. We could check out this Seaboyers' Emporium and pick her up on the way back," I heard Mom say.

"I'd rather take some driftwood home." Dad excused himself from shopping. "Can you find the emporium by yourself?"

"Of course I can! It's on the way to the lighthouse."

How Mom knew where all the stores were was a real mystery. She needed a map to find her way in downtown Saskatoon, but ask her to find a store and she navigated with the confidence of a Canada goose returning from Florida. It must be some kind of instinct that only women possess.

An emporium! I jumped with joy. I had never been to one before, and the prospect of exploring it now was not something I would turn down. I checked my pants pocket for the \$20 I had saved up for my trip. It was still there, crisp and neatly folded.

“Don’t get anything too big. There isn’t much space in the pickup for when we go back to Saskatchewan,” Dad said dryly.

Mom acknowledged him with a nod and took me by the elbow. I glanced at the tabby cat on the rock one more time, but she showed no signs of early co-operation. Dad bent down to pick up small pieces of dry driftwood.

“Seaboyers’ Emporium, here we come!”

In hindsight, I should have stayed on the beach with Dad and Henrietta. But I wanted to visit the emporium and look for hidden treasures. Little did I know that a treasure would find me and that I would never know if it was a blessing or a curse ... or that I would be tied to it for ever and eternity. A boy my age just does not think of such things.

CHAPTER 3

MARGARET Seaboyer stood in front of her emporium with her feet wide apart, her bulging calves resembling those of King Henry VIII. The sound of her cracking knuckles would have unnerved even a road-worn biker. It was an old habit from her previous line of work as a bouncer in a bar in Dartmouth. But all that was an ancient past now. Her career path had been radically altered by one call from the Coast Guard, informing her that her husband, Nelson, was missing at sea, his lobster traps unchecked. She still could not believe it, and neither could her only son, Joel. He still hoped his father was alive, but one look at her brother-in-law, Chester, a professional diver, had told her there was no hope. Forty hours, he said, 40 hours was how long the ocean gave you to survive. Forty hours before the cold took you.

When it rains it pours, and this is especially true in the Maritimes. The bank immediately sent a nasty letter about Nelson's mortgage. It said something about him being presumed dead but not legally dead and that foreclosure was imminent. Margaret suppressed a professional urge to drive up to Upper Tantallon, pick up the loan officer by his skinny ankles and bounce him up and down until he relented. But she was not in a bar, and he was not an unruly patron. Instead, she sat down heavily in the chair he offered her and, for the first time in her life, started to cry. It was so embarrassing that the banker shuffled the mortgage papers in front of him and

offered her an extension. Margaret vowed she would find a way to save Nelson's legacy. It was either that or lose their house and fishing boat.

So what do you do when you live on the southern shore and you have a lot of old stuff in your attic, a boat and a fishing shack? You get into the tourist industry, that's what. On the way home from the bank she conducted some quick market research that consisted of driving slowly up and down Peggy's Cove Road and counting all the various gift shops, art galleries, bed and breakfast places and restaurants. Their number per square kilometre increased as she got closer to Peggy's Cove. Margaret noted with satisfaction that there was a gap between them just before Indian Harbour – a gap that a woman like her could easily fill.

A family conference was duly called and the cards laid out.

"I say we start a gift shop in the fishing shack," Margaret opened the first volley.

"What about Dad's boat?" Joel said, scratching at his latest tattoo. The skin on his forearm was still red, healing from his latest attempts at artistic self-mutilation.

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life getting up at the crack of dawn, catching fish and lobsters?" his mother weighed in on him.

"No. I want to open my own tattoo parlour."

"Then who will run your father's business? Uncle Chester?" Margaret pointed at Exhibit B.

Chester Seaboyer shook his head slowly. He, too, had dreams that involved water, but they lay many fathoms below the restless surface of the ocean. Big dreams he was not ready to reveal yet ... Unconsciously, he reached for the pendant on a silver chain hidden under his shirt

and mulled over Margaret's proposal. Then he stated the facts.

"I am a diver, not a fisherman," he said. "I think Margaret is right, and if we join forces, we can make this work. It will be easy to transfer all my diving courses here, but I am going to need a place to stay."

"The attic above the gift shop can be yours. And you," Margaret beamed and then turned to Joel, "can turn the back room into a tattoo parlour."

Joel sat up straight. This could be his big break! Then his father's face came back to him, and he slumped back in his chair. Nelson had had little understanding for novel business ideas. His whole life had revolved around his fishing boat, the *Sea Dog*.

As if she had heard her son's thoughts, Margaret announced, "I have big plans for *Sea Dog* too."

The two surviving Seaboyer men exchanged a slightly worried look, their eyes swivelling back to General Margaret. She took a deep breath, her chest heaving and resembling a figurehead on a pitching galleon.

"Remember your father talking about the Seaboys?" she asked Joel quietly.

"There have always been Seaboys in Indian Harbour, and they have always lived off the sea. My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather. And nothing will ever change that," Joel said with reverence.

"And I am going to make sure it stays that way!" Margaret roared and slammed her fist on the Formica table, causing the two men to jump in their chairs.

"He meant fishing," Chester pointed out.

"Subject to interpretation," Margaret waved the objection away like a buzzing fly. "Tourists are a resource just like crustaceans, with the added benefit of giving you money without amputating your fingers first."

Joel put his hands in his pockets. He had already lost one digit on his left hand to a clever lobster and could not afford to lose any more, not if he were to be a tattoo artist.

“*Sea Dog* would make a great tour boat. We can even change the name to *Peggy’s Maiden Voyage* or something like that,” said Margaret.

“It’s bad luck to change a boat’s name,” Joel warned her. “And what is so important about Peggy?” he asked.

“Have you heard of Anne of Green Gables?” his mother pointed in the direction of Prince Edward Island.

“Yes.”

“Then you know that Anne Shirley, the flagship of PEI’s tourism, came from Nova Scotia. Imagine!”

“Mother, are you suggesting that Peggy of Peggy’s Cove could become a second Anne Shirley?”

Margaret nodded sagely. A serene look came over her eyes as she gestured toward the island’s lighthouse outside her kitchen window.

“A young girl, saved from a shipwreck and offered shelter in what is now Peggy’s Cove. A real girl, not a fictional one.”

Chester raised his hand as if he were in school and wanting to be heard by the teacher without drawing attention to himself.

“May I point out that we are well outside of Peggy’s Cove?” he said.

“A mere technicality. We can catch the tourists *before* they reach Peggy’s Cove and offer them a boat tour with Peggy on board.” Margaret’s face cracked into a jack-o’-lantern smile.

“If you mean the actor who had that funny Peggy show in the Old Red School House, he has moved to Ottawa,” Joel said.

“Has the marine fog not lifted from your brain?” Margaret scathed him. “Whoever pilots the boat will dress up as Peggy.”

Chester Seaboyer threw his head back and laughed like an asthmatic hyena. His nephew turned his face away and looked outside the window. Maybe fishing was not such a bad idea after all.

Sensing she was losing their support, Margaret pulled on the string embedded in every Seaboyer’s DNA: greed.

“I guarantee you we will be booked till the end of this tourist season and we will pay off the mortgage with no problem. Next year all the money will go into our pockets, in three equal shares,” she promised, her voice ringing with an echo of a chink of gold coins.

The three Seaboys looked at each other and stood up to shake hands. And that was the birth of Seaboys’ Emporium. It did not take much effort to turn the old fishing shack into a tourist zone. Margaret decided to go with the Maritime atmosphere, and she was surprisingly creative with it. The more weathered and rugged the exterior was, the more believable. She stacked old lobster traps on the side of the building and hung old buoys from trees. An ancient still that great-grandpa Seaboyer had used to make moonshine got dragged out of the forest and proudly displayed on the lawn. Joel was tasked with making the signs, his seven-foot-tall Peggy with a hinged arm a true masterpiece. Chester appropriated the attic above the shop like a hermit crab moving into a new shell, trying not to think of Margaret as a symbiotic anemone.

Initially they were worried they would not have the capital for buying merchandise, but Margaret did

not want to sell plastic lighthouses from China and tea cozies anyway.

“We’ll sell real Maritime treasures. There’s a ton of them in people’s attics, and they will pay us to be rid of the junk. Joel will go to estate auctions and pick up antiques for cheap. Chester, do you still have that loot you brought from the Florida Keys?”

“My ex took all the portable valuables, but the cannon balls and the antique Schrader diving suit would look good on display,” he replied grudgingly.

And so they hung the fifty-pound steampunk brass helmet with a canvas suit from a hook near the door to advertise Chester’s diving classes. Business started trickling in, but it was not the flood of cash Margaret had originally envisioned. She suspected the Peggy’s Cove art gallery and gift shop crowd was waging a secret trade war, although she had no proof. Well, if war was what they wanted, war was what they would get.

But it was hard to be angry on a bright, warm day such as this. Casting one more look at her shop sign, Margaret went inside to forge a new business strategy. While she was at it, she busied herself with polishing some dented silverware supplied by Chester, who had dumped it in the back room. Joel was out there somewhere, tinkering with *Sea Dog* and getting it ready for the first boat tour. If Angus MacPhee, a sailor from Peggy’s Cove, came to complain about their encroaching on his turf, he could kiss her fists. The ocean was big enough for more than one boating outfit. She could hear Chester up in the attic, cussing. He had probably hit his head on a roof beam again. Overall, all was well in the Seaboyer world. She nodded to herself as she closed the door behind her and bent down to work.

Outside, the sun was shining and gulls were gliding on the wind, laughing and calling to each other. Nothing suggested that in a few moments an ancient, almost-forgotten past would converge with the present like two ocean currents that could drag a person under. Some distance from the emporium, two figures crossed a wooden bridge, their shoes kicking up dust on the dirt and gravel road. It was a middle-aged woman and a boy of about 12 years of age who had his mother's cheekbones and his father's red hair. They were in a deep conversation that was being closely followed by a pair of ravens fluttering from tree to tree and rock to rock, giving the appearance of busy and completely normal Maritime birds.

When the woman and her son reached Seaboyers' Emporium, est. 1800, they stopped in their tracks and regarded the ancient diving suit swaying slightly in the breeze.

"I can't decide if it's something from a Jules Verne novel or an early prototype of a spacesuit."

"It's an old diving suit, Mom."

"It creeps me out."

The woman gave it a wide berth in case the suit came alive and tried to grab her. The boy tugged at it and turned it this way and that. The canvas was heavy and durable. He wondered if this item, too, was for sale. There was no price tag on it.

"Mom, wait for me!" he abandoned the ancient aquanaut and hurried after his mother, who had already pushed the door open.

"Hello? Can we come in?" she called.

There was no answer, but a shower of dust coming from above told them someone was moving around in the attic. It must be the shop owner. Mother and son

waited for their eyes to adjust to the gloomy interior, being drawn by instinct to the closest source of light. A green lamp had been lit on the counter, illuminating an old leather-bound ledger.

“Mom, is that a mermaid?” the boy was craning his neck and pointing at a fishing net suspended from the ceiling. A papier-mâché figure of a well-endowed half-woman, half-fish lay in it face down, fixing them with an unblinking stare. The boy’s mother put her hands over his eyes and propelled him forward.

“They should put a shirt on that thing,” she muttered. “There must be something for kids in here.”

“I want that one!” the boy pointed again, this time at a boxy contraption with a handle on the side and a metallic cylinder sticking out the front.

“What *is* that?” his mother wondered, inspecting the curious antique. “Some kind of a camera maybe?”

“There is no lens,” the boy pointed out. “Can I turn the handle and find out what it does? Please?”

The woman shook her head resolutely and then said: “Are you crazy? It’s a foghorn! What if we break it? Then we’ll have to buy it.”

They moved on, carefully studying every object on display and even the building itself. It was a post-and-beam construction, very close to a barn, with a high ceiling and stout wooden beams supporting it. Despite a slightly musty odour that hung in the unmoving air, there was not a single cobweb or an empty wasp’s nest in sight. The owner must be a woman – one with a bit of imagination.

They passed a showcase called *Titanic Treasures* that revealed a motley collection of dented forks and chipped teacups.

“Are these really from the *Titanic*?” the boy asked.

“Hardly. If you want to see real *Titanic* artifacts, I will take you to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic,” his mother replied.

The boy was disappointed. He was beginning to feel at home in this strange realm of cast-off relics from the past. All they wanted was a new home, just like abandoned animals in a shelter, their pathetic faces staring at you from behind the bars of their cages, transmitting an urgent telepathic message that said “Pick me, pick me!”

He felt there was an antique here just for him, a boy of 12 who had lived the sheltered life of an adored only child – an antique that would thrust him into the whirlpool of an unexpected adventure. A safe unexpected adventure. But where was it hiding?

“Let’s split up,” his mother decided. “I want to see those glass floats hanging in the back window. Why don’t you try on a kilt?” she propelled him forward.

Reluctantly, he obeyed. He had serious doubts about wanting a pleated skirt – especially when the boys back home in Destiny would never let him forget that he had bought one. And then he saw it.

“Wow, a *Braveheart* kilt ...”

On a rack shoved under a movie poster of Mel Gibson with his face painted blue and white was a motley collection of genuine if threadbare Nova Scotia tartans and matching hats. The boy looked for one his size, his heart filling with disappointment when there was none. Maybe he could buy a hat?

He grabbed one and put it on his head, turning around to look for a mirror. There was one in a dark corner, its long oval shape leaning against the wall. A wooden trunk had been placed in front of it to keep it from falling over. It would do. The boy took a step forward and yelped.

“Ouch!”

“Honey, are you okay?” his mother called out with concern.

“Just a stubbed toe,” the boy said, sucking his breath in and bending down to inspect the round and extremely solid object his sandalled foot had collided with. He whistled under his breath and reached for what seemed to be a piece of real history.

“A cannon ball ...” he whispered.

Nobody back home had a cannon ball! He had to buy it before his mother could stop him. What would he do with it, though? Maybe it would make a good doorstep ... or a paperweight. Yes, it was a multi-purpose object of dark and dangerous beauty – one that was about to be wrenched away from him.

“What do you think you are doing?” Margaret Seaboyer’s voice shot across the room with the speed and impact of a fishing harpoon.

The boy looked over his shoulder only to see a woman shaped like a sumo wrestler making a beeline for him. He was in trouble now. He looked down at the ball, which was becoming heavier by the second. Where could he put it?

“Sorry, I just ...” The ball slipped between his suddenly clammy fingers and rushed to meet with gravity. He managed to step back, thus saving his toes from getting crushed, but he could do nothing to save the protruding corner of the old trunk, which happened to be in the way.

Crack!

The brief noise of splintering wood made everyone in the shop wince. Margaret experienced a brief flash of guilt when she realized she did not have insurance

for squished boys' toes. She reacted in the only way she knew, with anger.

"You break it you buy it, young fella!" she pointed her fat finger at him.

"Nicky, what happened? Did you get hurt?" The boy disappeared in his mother's embrace and, to his horror, felt hot tears well up in his eyes.

"I'm okay," he said in a muffled voice and then pulled away. Everyone looked at his toes, which wiggled happily, all 10 of them safe and sound.

The tension in the air dispersed, and heart rates returned to normal.

"We are so sorry ... We'll buy the trunk, of course," the boy's mother turned to Margaret, who was still fuming out of habit.

"How much?"

Margaret narrowed her eyes and did a quick assessment of the wooden trunk with its big ugly gash. It had not been anything special to begin with, but now it was a total ruin. No one else would buy it, so she would have to give these people a good deal, especially if she wanted them to come back. And they would be back, for the cannon ball, for the float ... These customers were keepers.

"Ten bucks should do it," she pronounced her verdict. "Just so we're clear: All sales are final. No returns!"

"What if it's a faulty product?" the boy whispered to his mother. She whispered back, "Nicky, we are past that point now, don't you think?"

He nodded unhappily, turning his head as his mother walked him to the counter, without the coveted cannon ball.

"The hat is on the house," Margaret smiled sweetly.

"What hat?" the boy said and reached for his head.

“That hat,” Margaret gestured with her chin. “It suits your red hair.”

“It does,” his mother confirmed. “Wait till the boys in Saskatchewan see it.”

Nicky smiled weakly. His mother did not know that “the boys” were not really his friends. So far they had left him alone and he would make sure it stayed that way. The hat would be buried at the bottom of the wretched trunk he had to pay \$10 for.

The money was handed over with some reluctance.

“No receipt?” his mother asked.

“I am out of blank receipts, dear. But I will give one to you when you come back for one of them glass floats,” Margaret said, hefting the trunk as if it were a crate of tangerines.

“I kind of like that mirror too – the one my son was looking at earlier. The frame has such an intriguing design.”

“It’s a scrying mirror. Or so I was told,” Margaret leaned forward. “It belonged to my great-grandmother, who was psychic.”

“What’s a scrying mirror?” Nicky asked, looking from one woman to the other.

“A divination tool,” a male voice answered, and all three turned toward it. Chester Seaboyer stood with his arms crossed on his chest, chewing on a match sticking out from the corner of his thin mouth. He had a slightly dangerous aura about him – give him an eye patch and a bandana and he could pass for a pirate.

“Ah, Chester, right on time. Please help this lady with the trunk,” Margaret gestured for him to come closer. She would give him an earful about those cannon balls later on.

Chester ambled across the room, slowly unfolding his arms, his eyes assessing the financial worth of the mother and son in front of him.

"Which house do you live in?" he asked. "I did not see a car parked outside."

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Nicky's mother gave Chester a polite smile that said "Thank you, but no thank you" and urged her son to take the other handle of the trunk.

"No worries, we will take care of it. Thank you very much!"

"I will get the door," Chester insisted. He watched them leave the emporium, his eyes unblinking like the glass visor of the Schrader diving suit.

When they were out of earshot, Nicky and his mother looked at each other over the brown polished surface of the \$10 trunk.

"That guy gave me the creeps!" she rolled her eyes.

"Mom, everything is giving you the creeps today."

"That's because you scared me to death. I already saw you with prosthetic toes. What will your father say?"

"That I am grounded," the boy sighed. The charges were piling up today. A runaway cat, a damaged antique ... What did life have in store for him next?

"Well, it was an accident," his mother ruled. Incensed, she added, "What were they thinking, having cannon balls lying around where anybody can trip on them?"

"I didn't know they could be so heavy! Do you think the one I held was from the French-English wars?"

"Maybe that Chester guy knows. I am not sure I believe the baloney about a scrying mirror, but the frame was lovely, all tangled roots and spirals."

"Maybe you should get it then," Nicky suggested.

“But where would I put it? There is no space in the pickup, and that goes for your trunk too.”

“Dad will think of something.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way, changing sides occasionally to give their hands a break. They did not stop until they reached the old white house with a fat tabby cat sunning herself on the front porch.

“Henrietta! She’s come back,” Nicky exclaimed happily. Finally, something had gone right. But the cat ran for it as soon as she saw them and scooted around the corner, diving into the thicket.

“I’ll go find her,” he sighed.

CHAPTER 4

THE best way to catch most reluctant cats is by offering them food. And our cats were no exception, especially Samilian, who had never gotten over the trauma of starting his life as a hungry trailer-park kitten from which he was rescued just in time. I could still remember the cold spring day when I laid eyes on a litter of five kittens huddled together for warmth and trying to sleep to forget their hunger. The woman who owned them asked which one I wanted. Dad had spared me the agony of choosing by saying that we would take all of them. That night the kittens went to sleep with their bellies full to bursting, safe and cozy inside Mom's old writing desk, a place of their own choice.

But as easy as Samilian was to bribe with edible gifts, his sister Henrietta was a little more difficult case. She valued freedom and independence above all else. I had brought a can of cat food for her all the same.

Behind the house the air felt nice and cool. A sweet smell I did not recognize led me to a big honeysuckle bush growing against the side of an old outhouse. I pulled on the door, but it was locked. Someone had nailed spoons and bent forks to its wall for some reason. I shrugged and continued my walk to the end of the property marked by tall trees and a hill near an eroding shoreline.

Where was that cat?

A faint rustling sound came from the thicket where a disturbance among merry ferns suggested it was the hiding place of a small animal.

"Henri! Kitty kitty ..." I called out, confident she was there. I was wrong.

The rocket of a pheasant burst out from the foliage, startling me. I had seen pheasants in a picture before, but I had no idea they were that big in real life. The bird crowed loudly, flashing its bright-red head, and ran as quickly and as far away from me as possible.

"Watch out for the fox!" I yelled at his disappearing tail. Something must have startled the bird, and it was not me. Henrietta was nearby, I was sure. Perhaps I should let her come to me instead.

I took a seat on a large rectangular rock covered with cushy moss. Behind it a mighty pine tree towered, its trunk forked into a trident. And who was lounging on one of its thick branches if not Henrietta the cat?

"There you are ... I have been looking for you everywhere," I said and reached for her.

She started purring. She was glad to see me, but I could tell she did not feel like going home just yet.

"Come on down. I brought you some food."

I fished in my pocket and took out the can of cat food. She saw the label and decided it was not her favourite. What was I supposed to do? I tried to grab her, but she slipped through my hands and jumped down from the tree, her bandy legs carrying her up the hill. Cats!

I climbed after her. As I soon discovered, the hill was deceptively small, its eastern side a steep wall of granite overgrown with heath and lichens, which I used freely for support.

At the very top was an old gazebo with a spectacular view of the island, the lighthouse and the bay. Henrietta

ducked under the structure, pretending something terribly interesting was hidden there, something she just had to investigate. On my belly now, I crawled after her, but she would not budge. She started digging.

Resigned, I backed out of there and decided to take a seat inside the gazebo instead. Within moments I started daydreaming. I imagined myself as an explorer who came to Talon Island before it even had a name. I would build a stone tower on this very spot and use it to keep a lookout in case a band of pirates invaded the cove. My father had told me on our drive to Nova Scotia that there was an island not far from here called Oak Island, where pirates might have buried a huge treasure in the so-called Money Pit. Even the American president Franklin Roosevelt had believed in it. Various efforts to excavate were always halted when underground water flooded the shafts. My father thought it was an ingenious design.

“Why do people keep digging there if it is futile?” I asked my mother.

“Greed,” she replied.

Maybe it was not just greed. Maybe it was curiosity ... or the need to solve a puzzle left by an ancient engineer.

My mind kept weaving a tapestry of an imaginary sea voyage to Oak Island when a raspy voice snapped its invisible thread.

“Are you going to eat that?”

The voice was strange, almost uncanny, and I could not place it at first, but I thought I had heard it before. It seemed to be coming from above.

“Excuse me?” I replied, looking around and up.

“The cat food. Are you going to have it?” the invisible speaker pressed on.

I had to find out who it was. I stood up, tripped and fell out of the gazebo. Another voice snickered from a nearby pine tree. With as much dignity as I could muster, I stood up and dusted off my pants. Henrietta the cat brushed against my ankles and gave me a puzzled look.

“Henri, did you say something?” I muttered.

“Not her. Over here,” the voice said, and it was definitely not coming from my cat.

I lifted my eyes and there it was, sitting on the top of the gazebo like a fallen angel. A raven, slender and sleek, its feathers so black they had a blue sheen to them. Its eyes were two gimlets, all seeing and disturbingly intelligent. I felt a little stunned by the revelation that ravens could talk, but I had been raised to be polite to people and kind to animals. A raven fluent in English deserved deep respect.

“Hello. Um ...” I had suddenly become tongue-tied. What would you say to a raven? I looked down at the can I had been clutching in my hand all that time. “You can have the cat food if you are sure it won’t make you sick.”

“We have cast-iron stomachs,” the raven rasped.

“What do you normally eat?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know,” said the mysterious second voice, muffled by pine needles.

I squared my shoulders and walked over to the nearest flat rock, where I upended the can. Then I took a step back.

The raven gave a piercing squawk and fluttered down from his perch. Another raven shot out of a tree and tried to grab the food for himself. A brief fight ensued, although most of it was just posturing. They acted like squabbling siblings.

“This is posh,” said one of them.

“Got any bread to go with it?” said the other raven, turning to me.

“Um, no. But I can bring you some next time.” I could never turn down a hungry animal. My cats would attest to that any time.

“French sourdough, if you please,” the ravens requested.

I had never eaten that kind of bread before, but I was sure my mom would know how to make it. I made a mental note to ask her about it. The ravens were fast and efficient eaters. They picked up the last morsels of food and started preening their feathers. Behind me, Henrietta was flexing her claws. Seeing the size of the ravens’ talons, I just hoped she would not attack them.

“Are you two brothers?” I hazarded a guess after some careful observation. Actually, the ravens were almost identical, like twins. Did birds have twins? I did not think so.

“What makes you say that?” the first raven cocked his head.

“You look the same, and you mirror each other.” I pointed at the first raven. “You take the lead, and you,” I pointed at the other one, “finish what he started.”

“There is no such thing as twin birds,” raven number one objected.

“Maybe you are special then,” I turned my palms up.

“He’s got a point,” said the second raven.

“Can’t argue with that,” the first raven nodded.

“May I ask you a personal question? Who taught you English?”

The ravens exchanged a quick glance. This was a decisive moment. They would either take off, and I would likely never see them again, or they would stay

and I could learn all about the secret life of ravens. Which one would it be?

The ravens twitched their tails and spread their wings as if they were making to leave. My heart sank a little, but I kept a poker face. Then Henrietta decided to take a closer look-see and walked over to the rock. She stood on her hind legs and pawed the air playfully, sniffing at the two birds, now frozen. Then she gave a delicate sneeze.

“Gesundheit!” the ravens said in unison.

“Is she allergic to feathers?” said the first one.

“More likely to cat dander,” said the other. An argument followed, and I decided to stay out of it.

“How can a cat be allergic to her own dander?”

“An autoimmune disorder. Though she is probably allergic to your feathers.”

“Or your mites.” The ravens were close to pecking at each other. I did not like conflict, so I decided to step in.

“Guys,” I said, “she is not allergic. By the way, her name is Henrietta Sinclair. And my name is Nick Reed.”

“Why is she a Sinclair when you are a Reed? Is she adopted?”

“No, it’s not like that. Yes, she is adopted, but we named her after Henry Sinclair. So her full name is Henrietta Sinclair Reed.”

“Who was he?” raven number two asked.

“I think I have read about him,” his brother nodded. “Remember Rosslyn Chapel?” he turned to his brother, who blinked at him. “It is a long story. I will tell you later,” he murmured.

“You can read?” I asked, completely dumbfounded. A literate raven! If only I could bring him back with me to Destiny.

“And write. We read books the library throws out.”

“That’s sad,” I shook my head, “about the books, that is.”

“It should be criminal,” the ravens agreed. “Books are sacred.”

Henrietta lay down in the grass and started rolling from side to side. The ravens looked at each other and then at me.

“She likes us.”

“I like you too,” I said with something like hope in my voice. A home-schooled boy from rural Saskatchewan does not exactly have a plethora of friends.

The proverbial ice had been broken ...

The first raven bowed his head and spread his wings in a little curtsy. Then he said solemnly, “Hugin of Clan Rune, at your service.”

“Munin of Clan Rune, also at your service,” said his brother.

“It’s an honour to meet you, Hugin and Munin,” I replied, feeling my face crack into a big smile. I looked around to see if anyone had witnessed this historic event, but we were alone. I could not wait to tell my parents, and then I realized how it might sound. Had I been five, I could get away with claiming I had raven friends, but at the age of 12 I should have already known that ravens did not speak English.

They did not, did they? Well, no, they did not, except for the ravens of Clan Rune, apparently. I had to know more.

Now that we had been introduced and a gift of food had been accepted, the two winged brothers inched closer to the edge of the rock, mischief dancing in their eyes.

“Can we sit on your shoulders? We’ve always wanted to do it, but every time we try to land on someone, they flail their arms and run away screaming.”

I was taken aback by that strange request. I knew parrots liked to do that, but somehow I dared not compare the ravens to parrots out loud.

“Maybe I can get my mom to sew shoulder pads into my shirt ... I wish I had a leather glove like my uncle Bo. He has a falcon. Would an old baseball glove do?” I asked.

“Do we look like trained monkeys?” said Munin testily.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I assured him. “But how is sitting on my wrist degrading while sitting on my shoulder is not?”

“You don’t know who we are, do you?” Hugin leaned forward, his black beady eyes suddenly not so friendly.

“Two ravens?” I hazarded.

“Well, that will be your homework then,” Hugin said haughtily and launched himself in the air, his wings flapping like black fans.

“Remember the sourdough!” Munin shrieked and followed his brother.

I could only watch as they wheeled above my head and beat their wings to gain more height. Had I offended them?

“What did I say?” I yelled, but the only answer was the laughter of gulls. I bent down to pick up Henrietta, who nuzzled my face as if to say that cats were not nearly as catty as ravens. On my way down the hill I replayed the earlier dialogue in my mind, analyzing every word, every nuance. Just what did I know about the two ravens? Only their names, Hugin and Munin of Clan Rune. And

the fact that they were fluent in English. Perhaps that was a good start.

What a day! We had only just arrived on Talon Island and already there was a broken antique trunk on my rap sheet and homework from two very mysterious, very magical ravens. I could not wait to get started on it.

CHAPTER 5

*Hugin and Munin fly each day
over the spacious earth.*

*I fear for Hugin, that he come not back,
yet more anxious am I for Munin ...*

I HELD the book down with my hands to keep it from being blown away by the gusty winds of time ... and to steady myself. *The Poetic Edda* was not where I had expected to find a mention of Hugin and Munin. I was reading a poem about the Norse god Odin, who, according to another book, received world news from the two ravens at dinnertime. But how could the Hugin and Munin I knew be Odin's ravens when the Norse gods did not exist anymore?

There was always the possibility that my ravens had read these books and chosen the mythical names for themselves. It was a place to start, at least. I scribbled furiously in my notebook, completely absorbed in my research at the Tantallon Public Library. A plate of cookies – practically contraband by library regulations – materialized on my desk. The ecstatic face of a senior librarian beamed at me. I could see myself through her eyes, a 12-year-old boy sitting in the study room on a bright sunny day. A miracle.

"Thank you," I mouthed, aware that silence was holy in a library.

"Can I copy something from this book?" I whispered. The librarian whispered back: "Sure, but only if it's a

page or two and for your own research. Copyright laws, you see.”

I gathered my things and followed the woman to the copier. I showed her a picture from an Icelandic manuscript portraying Odin with two ravens sitting on his shoulders.

“This one,” I said. “I want a copy of this image, please.”

“Do you like Norse mythology?” she asked, her fingers punching a series of buttons.

“Um, I am researching a couple of ravens, Hugin and Munin.”

“You know, there is a painting of them in this library, if you would like to see it.”

A minute later I stood in front of a wall featuring the artist of the month, Ariel de la Mer, and her *Moonstruck* collection. She had painted the two ravens all right, sitting on a branch at midnight, munching on a full moon resembling a giant cookie. She had made the craters on the surface of the moon look like chocolate chips. For reasons unknown, the birds were wearing headbands with purple and white beads. The next piece was an intriguing depiction of a small lighthouse with a full moon in the lantern room. Was it the Talon Island lighthouse? The painting did not say. But the most beautiful one was of a mermaid opening lobster traps underwater, one of which contained, you guessed it, a full moon.

Ariel de la Mer was a seriously moonstruck person. And she knew my ravens, there was no doubt about it. I had not noticed it at first, but upon a closer inspection of the first painting, I discovered the dark shape of Shut In Island in the background. I felt elated that someone else

besides me had met the talking ravens and that I had not been dreaming about my encounter with them.

In my notebook I wrote down Ariel's name and went to the information desk to inquire about her. Unfortunately all they could tell me was that she had wished to remain somewhat anonymous. I could always do a search on the Internet, but my mother would be picking me up soon. Overall, my research so far had been fruitful: I had another lead to go on.

I checked out two books and stuffed them into my backpack, along with my notebook and the copied page. Then I went outside to wait for my mom.

"Hey, skipper, need a ride?" she waved at me when she pulled up in our pickup truck. I climbed in and set the backpack on the middle seat.

"Are you going to read all that? I thought summer was for having fun," she said with some surprise.

"Oh, it's part of the fun. I'm researching ravens."

"Ornithology?"

"Um, mythology."

"I see. So I have asked around for that sourdough bread you wanted and there is a place that sells it."

I felt a surge of optimism. Armed with a fresh loaf of sourdough and a quote from *The Poetic Edda*, the ravens would not deny me.

"We have to go to the town of Chester; it's on the other side of St. Margaret's Bay," Mom pointed to the westbound highway.

"What about Dad?"

"He's editing video, so he can use some peace and quiet. Also, we are supposed to get some rain in the next couple of days, so I suggest we drive to Chester now."

And so west we went, to pirates' land.

The village of Chester is one of Nova Scotia's coastal beauties. According to Mom's tourist guide, in 1782 American privateers planned to raid the village but, thanks to the local women's ruse, raided Lunenburg instead. More than one sign we passed on the road referred to pirates or Captain Kidd. But the biggest surprise came when Mom pulled over in front of the Black Sails Bakery & Deli.

Its walls were black, its window frames white, and a big rusted ship lantern hung from the roof on the corner. A small mountain of beeswax inside it suggested that someone was lighting it regularly at night. Three flags fluttered madly in the wind: one German, one Canadian and one pirate (the Jolly Roger). Above the entrance to the bakery was a shop sign shaped like a wooden shield with two crossed sabres and a pretzel. A warm, sweet scent was enticing us to come in. With a slight hesitation, we pushed the door open.

"*Guten Tag!*" Mom said cheerfully.

"*Sie sind Deutsch?*" a barrel-chested man wearing a bandana replied, dusting his floury hands on his black T-shirt. He must have been the baker. A pirate baker, although to my disappointment he was missing an eye patch.

"Sorry, that's all I remember from my high-school German classes," Mom smiled weakly.

"Ah, don't worry. Can I interest you in some bread or maybe this Black Forest cake?" the baker said gruffly.

We looked at the menu next to the counter, which had been written with white chalk on a black board. Everything on it sounded delicious. Involuntarily, my mouth started to water and my stomach grumbled.

"French sourdough – two loaves, please," I said.

"There's no need to drag the French into this," the pirate baker shook his head.

"Just sourdough then." Mom turned to me and asked me what I wanted. I saw round poppyseed cakes like my grandma in Europe made every time I visited her.

"Five poppyseed cakes, please. What's Teazer Lite?" I pointed at a cluster of brown bottles perspiring in the cooler.

"Ah, *es ist* a very good choice. It's root beer. I make my own recipe. But if you are asking about *Teazer*, that is a long story. Care to sit down?" He gestured at a small table under a mural depicting a ship ablaze with fire.

I looked at Mom, who raised her eyebrows slightly but sat down on the chair the baker offered her. While we munched on poppyseed cakes, he sipped his root beer and shared a strange tale.

"I've seen it, you know," he said conspiratorially.

"How do you mean?" Mom asked.

"The ghost ship. Teazer Light, they call it. Down in Mahone Bay."

"Is this it?" I asked, pointing at the mural. The baker nodded gravely.

"That's *Young Teazer*, an American privateer schooner that was almost captured by the British in Mahone Bay."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"1812. The ship's crew did not want to surrender, so they blew the vessel up. The lantern outside is a replica of a real one from the wreckage."

We turned our heads to the window and craned to see the lantern. It was still there, swinging in the wind with faint creaks.

"Wow," was all I managed to say. "Where is the original lantern?"

"A man from Blandford has it. He would not sell it to me," the baker shrugged.

"Did you really see a ghost ship?" Mom steered the conversation back to the supernatural. She was scared of it, but she could not help wanting to hear about it.

"I did. It was an apparition – a ghostly ship surrounded by a cloud of smoke and fiery light."

We looked at the mural again, and I wondered if the baker had painted it himself based on his strange experience.

"Can there be a logical explanation for the ghost light?" Mom wondered, aloud.

"Such as the light from Venus, trapped swamp gas or a Russian space mirror? Well, they say it's fog at full moon, but there was no fog the night I saw it."

"Fascinating. So what did you do?" she asked.

"I kept as quiet as a mouse," he whispered and turned to me. "Remember, never speak to the crew of a ghost ship."

"Why?" I asked, puzzled.

"Because they will come and claim your soul, making you one of them!" he wagged his finger, his eyes bulging in mock terror.

"Sounds like good advice," Mom smiled and tugged at my sleeve, indicating it was time to leave.

"It was nice to meet you ..."

"Ralf Kaspar," the baker said and stuck out his hand. My mother shook it vigorously. She was always glad to meet immigrants and hear their stories. She must have liked his, as did I, because she put some change into a tip jar labelled *Money Pit*.

"Wait," Ralf said and glanced at my mother's wedding band, "this is for your husband."

Surprised, Mom accepted a couple of bottles of Teazer Lite. We said our goodbyes and, clutching our purchases, walked out into the light.

On the way home I fell asleep, dreaming about a phantom ship with a figurehead made out of sourdough.

Later that night I was reading my library books and jotting down more notes. There was not a whole lot of information about Hugin and Munin, but what I had found out so far was mesmerizing. The name Hugin meant Thought, and Munin was Memory. The god Odin listened to them every night in his feasting hall called Valhalla. According to one story, he had given the ravens the gift of speech.

But that had happened at least a thousand years ago, before Christianity stuck its heavy boot in the door of Norse people's beliefs. A thousand years versus yesterday, when I talked to Hugin and Munin myself.

Questions, more questions ... I resumed reading.

Down to the last poppyseed cake, I stopped chewing when the word *fylgja* caught my attention. It described a supernatural being usually shaped like an animal. Seeing one was considered to be an omen – an omen that could be good or bad. I rolled onto my back and thought for a while. Were the mysterious ravens my *fylgjur*? If they were, what did their popping into my life portend?

Silver stars were dotting the darkened sky when I finally closed the books and rubbed my temples. The house had gone quiet, with my parents sitting in deck chairs on the porch, sipping Teazer Lite. Even the cats were getting ready to sleep, except for little Toby, who was playing inside the Seaboyer trunk. My father had pried the lock off it earlier, only to reveal some musty yellowed newspapers lining the bottom. But whereas I failed to see any value in it, for the young cats it was

close to heaven. They sniffed it thoroughly and then took turns trying to catch a phantom mouse under the rustling newspapers.

Presently, Toby triangulated the imaginary prey and pounced on it with precision.

Click.

The little cat froze. Then she started digging furiously. She had my interest now, and I bent over the trunk to grab her and lift her out. She resisted, scratching my hand and twisting like a weasel.

“Here you go,” I said, throwing a balled-up newspaper across the room. She sprang out of the trunk and sprinted after it. Having the antique to myself, I passed my hand over the bottom and the sides. There was a knot in the wood that was protruding slightly. I saw another knot just like it on the opposite end. Holding my breath, I pressed down on it with my thumb.

Click.

The trunk had a false bottom! There was no other explanation. Carefully, I removed the knots and hesitated. Should I be doing this alone? What if there was some deadly fungus trapped beneath the wood, waiting to release its spores onto unsuspecting treasure seekers?

I stomped on the floor three times, a signal Dad and I had agreed on if I needed my parents to come upstairs. Then I remembered they were outside, so I opened the balcony door and yelled at Dad to come quickly.

“What’s up, buddy?” he said when he entered my room.

“Dad! There is something in this trunk!!!”

“Let me see ...”

He studied the knot holes and then rapped his knuckles over the trunk’s bottom in different places.

“It’s definitely hollow. How about we lift the panel together?” he suggested.

And so we hooked our fingers around the clandestine holes and yanked. I will never forget the moment I laid my eyes on the small bundle snugly inserted in a secret compartment. With utmost care bordering on reverence, I unwrapped the piece of oilskin and my eyes went wide.

“Is that a bottle?” I asked.

“It’s called a flask. People used to keep alcohol in them. It’s just a hunch, but I think this is a bootlegger’s trunk.”

“What’s a bootlegger, Dad?”

“During the Prohibition era, when alcohol was illegal, people engaged in rum-running and hid alcohol in all kinds of places to avoid being detected.”

“Such as in a false bottom of a trunk?”

“Exactly. Can I see it?”

I handed the metal flask over and watched Dad shake it. There was no sloshing sound inside. He tried to unscrew the cap, but it had stuck, probably due to corrosion over the years.

“How old is it?” I wondered.

“Hmm, let’s see. I think Nova Scotia ended the Prohibition in 1930, so the flask could be from that year or older.”

“Those newspapers inside the trunk were from the 1960s.”

“That does not mean the flask could not have been hiding there all this time. Maybe the trunk was kept in the family and eventually the false bottom was forgotten.”

“Can I keep it?” I asked, taking the flask back. My hand closed around it as if it had been a genie lamp. Finally, my own treasure!

“I don’t see why not. It’s a pretty neat find for \$10. We can clean it up and try to open the cap. Do you mind if I look at the trunk’s lock mechanism tomorrow? I want to see how it was made.”

I nodded. We replaced the panel and put the knots back inside their holes. Then I closed the lid and sat down on it. Toby came over and rubbed against my knee. Had it not been for her, the trunk might never have revealed its secret. I smiled at the memory of Mrs. Seaboyer insisting that I buy the trunk.

“Thank you, little *fylgja*,” I said softly, rubbing Toby between her ears.

Dad went downstairs to tell Mom about the unusual find, and she was delighted to hear about it. She said so when she came to kiss me good night. She also said drinking alcohol was bad and that I should not get any ideas. I assured her I had no intentions of becoming an alcoholic. But I had every intention of finding out more about the flask’s origins. Would Mrs. Seaboyer know something about it? Had the trunk come from her family? What would she say when she found out about my discovery?

“All sales are final,” I reminded myself. The flask was mine, as was the trunk. I could not wait to tell the ravens.

Sleep eluded me that night, and eventually I gave up on it. I turned on the bedside lamp and, lying on my belly, fiddled with my flask. The metal had tarnished, so I would have to buff it up. Perhaps it was made of silver. I shook it a couple of times and then started biting the cap, an old habit from when I was a teething baby. With some dogged persistence, the cap came loose. Holding the flask under the lamplight, I peeked inside.

“A scroll?”

I padded to the bathroom to find a pair of tweezers and, brimming with curiosity, proceeded to liberate yet another secret from the now-extremely-valuable Seaboyer trunk. The tightly rolled paper had been tied with waxed thread and carried a message written in faded ink.

*Under an oak tree, a chest of gold
Raven's story I once was told
Guarded by eagle's watchful gaze
... cliffs rise from morning haze
Follow the sea serpent's hiss
The right time you must not miss
Take the oath or take ... gold
Choose ... and you shan't grow old*

My hands felt clammy, my cheeks were burning and my head was pounding. The poem took the liberty of memorizing itself in my mind. I did not call for my parents this time. It could wait till morning. I wanted to be alone with my treasure map, because that was what I firmly believed the poem was. A treasure map that needed to be decoded. And if you have been paying attention all this time, you will guess who the code talkers are.

The ravens.

It was no coincidence that I had walked into Seaboyers' Emporium, est. 1800, picked up a cannon ball and shattered an old trunk. It was fate when I encountered the raven brothers Hugin and Munin. They were my *fylgjur*, although it was yet to be revealed whether my destiny was to meet with great fortune or death.

By the time the pink fingers of dawn touched the east, I had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 6

“YOO-HOO!”
“Anybody home?”

Peck, peck, peck ...

A pair of strange voices coming from the other side of the sliding door woke me up. My body felt heavy, and for a moment I could not even get it to acknowledge me as its master. A raspy tongue was licking my earlobe, engulfing me with the pungent odour of cat food.

Pushing Sheba the cat aside, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. I blinked and two ravens came into focus. Munin was peeking inside while Hugin was strutting up and down the wooden planks of the balcony.

“Hugin, Munin! What are you doing here?” I said when I pushed the glass door open. They poked their heads in, openly curious about my den.

“Rough night?” Munin remarked after noting my hair, which looked like a bird’s nest.

“Nice mirror,” Hugin pointed with his beak.

“What mirror?” I wondered, looking around to see what he was talking about.

On the wall across from my bed hung an oval beauty of a mirror that I vaguely recognized as the so-called scrying mirror from Seaboyers’ Emporium. My mother must have gone there this morning and bought it. But why was it in my room?

“It’s my mom’s. I’m not sure why she put it in my bedroom, though.”

I rubbed my eyes again and wondered what hour of the day it was. The ravens paid me no heed for a few moments, taking their time to explore my room. Sheba watched them with a kind of fascinated horror from atop my dresser. Their initial inspection concluded, the birds walked back to the balcony door.

Munin gave a little bow and said, "You and the sourdough are cordially invited to a picnic in the pine grove."

"After noon," Hugin added, "if the time suits."

"That's really nice, thank you ..." I replied, smiling at the mention of sourdough. Nothing got past these ravens. It was good to know that I could use sourdough as leverage should the need arise.

"After noon then," I agreed, and they took their leave. Seizing her chance, Sheba sprang from the dresser and missed their tails by one millimetre. No doubt it had been a perfectly calculated move. Her intention was not to harm them – just to show them whose territory they were in.

The ravens made a mad dash for the balcony rail and fluttered away, squawking and cussing in a tongue I did not recognize.

"Sheba! Those are my friends. Be nice."

She wagged her ringed tail lazily, obviously pleased with her stunt. Ever since Samilian had jumped onto the back of a Canada goose back in Destiny, she had been wanting to outdo him. I just hoped the cats would have more sense when it came to the local eagle.

Shortly after lunch, when all the dishes had been washed, I told my parents I would be out back. They seemed happy that I liked Talon Island and did not ask me any questions. Eventually I would have to tell them

about the treasure, but I wanted to talk about it with the ravens first.

The weather had become considerably hot. Without any breeze, the air felt sultry under the pale sky. It had been a good choice to have the picnic under the trees, which shielded our party from the worst of the heat.

Hugin and Munin were settled comfortably in the trident-shaped tree, their black profiles sharp and alert against the shadows of the coastal forest. It was easy to picture them as the mythical birds of old, waiting for their divine master to return from his journey in the world of mortals.

They unfolded their wings in anticipation as I spread a red checkered cloth I had borrowed from the house. The sourdough had been sliced for their convenience, compliments of Mom, who thought I was having a snack by myself.

“Please, help yourselves. It’s for you,” I gestured toward the bread.

Munin darted first and grabbed three slices. Hugin only took one slice and returned to his branch. I munched on the heel. The sourdough was not bad, but it tasted strange to me. Definitely an acquired taste.

“So, young friend, have you done your homework?” Hugin asked and cocked his head.

I nodded mutely and indicated that I was still chewing. Then I pulled out my notebook and started to quote from *The Poetic Edda*.

“Hugin and Munin fly each day over the spacious earth. I fear for Hugin, that he come not back, yet more anxious am I for Munin ...”

The ravens exchanged a meaningful look.

“I’ve always liked Thorpe’s translation,” Hugin said appreciatively.

“You are named after Odin’s ravens, Thought and Memory,” I continued with my findings.

“Why is he saying ‘named after?’” mumbled Munin, the genuine article.

“Well, you cannot be the original Munin, can you?” I asked, looking from one raven to the other.

“It’s complicated,” Hugin twitched.

“No, it’s not,” Munin stepped in and shook off the last bread crumbs from his chest. “Am I the first Munin? I know I am not the last one. Time is not linear, like humans believe; for us ravens it is circular. It has no beginning and no end. Inside the circle lies the collective memory of our kind. I hold the memories of all the Munins before me, and I will pass mine on to my descendant.”

I sat back on my heels and attempted to comprehend what I had just been told.

“So what you are saying is that Munin, or Memory, is your function,” I said.

“Precisely.”

“He calls himself Monroe,” Hugin snickered.

“Shut up, Hugging,” Munin pecked at him.

“Peace!” I implored. “If both of you are the heirs of the mythical birds of Odin, does that mean that Odin really existed?”

“Why is he using the past tense?” Munin whispered to his brother, who was reaching for another slice of bread.

“You can’t be serious,” I said and passed both of them some more sourdough.

“Gods live in the realm of belief,” I argued with the wisdom of all my 12 years, “and once people stop believing in them, they are gone. Vikings converted to Christianity, and Jesus replaced Odin.”

The ravens looked at each other and rolled their eyes. It was Hugin who spoke next.

“Close your eyes, little human; that will shut your brain up. Now, touch a tree or a rock.”

I did as he said, feeling the roughness of granite and the velvety softness of moss. Rock. Moss. Where was the profound ... I never finished the thought. It was so subtle that I had been missing it all this time. It was a flow ... of life or energy; I did not know for sure. It varied in its intensity; thick and slow inside the rock, thin and quick shooting from the moss tips. It had a purpose and most determined belonging, and feeling it made me happy. My fingers traced the root of a tree that tunnelled underground and entwined itself with earth and the roots of other trees to ensure its survival. I opened my eyes.

“They are still here,” a revelation hit me.

“The gods never left,” Hugin and Munin nodded in unison. “A storm does not need anyone to believe in it.”

“I have so many questions for you ... but this one is especially pressing,” I concluded the religious discourse for now and reached for the flask in my backpack. It fit into my hand perfectly, like a little turtle. I held it up for the ravens to see. A stray beam of sunlight that had found an opening among the thick pines made it gleam. Transfixed, both birds stared at the shiny object.

“I found this hidden in an old trunk I bought in Seaboyers’ Emporium. There is a message inside that I would like to read to you.”

“Do go on,” said Hugin dryly.

I loosened the cap and upended the flask on my palm to show them the mini scroll. The poem was already hovering in my mind, ready to roll off my tongue.

*“Under an oak tree, a chest of gold
Raven’s story I once was told
Guarded by eagle’s watchful gaze
... cliffs rise from morning haze
Follow the sea serpent’s hiss
The right time you must not miss
Take the oath or take ... gold
Choose ... and you shan’t grow old”*

The stunned silence that followed was punctuated by the sounds of crickets putting on an unplugged concert in the grass.

“Tell me that poem is not about you,” I challenged the ravens.

“It’s not about us,” Hugin countered in his deadpan voice.

“What he means,” Munin jumped in hastily, “is that *we* were not the ones who squawked.”

“Aha!” I exclaimed and wrote down in my notebook: ‘ravens involved but not H or M.’

“What’s he writing down?” Munin turned to Hugin, who shushed him.

“Talking ravens, island in haze ... The treasure is here, isn’t it?” I hammered the iron while it was hot.

The ravens went into a huddle and whispered intensely. I overheard “Is he the one?” and “Now what?” Then they smoothed their feathers and turned to face me.

“Are you a knight or of similar rank?” Munin asked gravely.

“No, but I am the youngest correspondent of *The Destiny Observer* and the founder and only member of Destiny’s Astronomy Club. If you require a swordsman, my uncle Bo is for hire.”

“Impressive, however we are only authorized to speak to knights,” came a strange answer.

I was not ready to give up yet.

“Maybe I am descended from knights. Or maybe I have knightly qualities. Rest assured that I only have honourable intentions with the treasure.”

“Don’t you desire fame and fortune like most of your kind?” Hugin snapped.

I shook my head and put the flask back in my backpack.

“No,” I said quietly. “Haven’t you watched the *Indiana Jones* movies? If there is a treasure, it belongs in a museum. All I want is to find it. After all, it has already found me.”

And then I added, “If we joined forces and combined our talents and skills, I believe this message in the flask could be decoded.”

Munin had been listening raptly, ready to sign up for the treasure hunt. But Hugin held his wing out to keep Munin at bay and then gave me a very strange piece of advice.

“We will get back to you. In the meantime do not, under any circumstances, read that message by candlelight, especially on a stormy night.”

“Why?” I frowned, but the ravens did not bother to answer. The picnic was over. Had I said something wrong again?

The two raven brothers prepared for takeoff. Feeling slightly dejected, I gave them the remaining sourdough and watched them leave.

I stayed in the shade of the mighty pine tree and thought about everything that had been said or implied. The existence of the treasure had been all but confirmed,

as well as Clan Rune's involvement. Why had Munin asked me if I was a knight?

There could not have been many knights in Nova Scotia, and the probability of one being on Talon Island was zero. It was rather strange, if you asked me.

Later that evening the wind started to pick up, herding heavy clouds over St. Margaret's Bay. The temperature dropped, and it was not hard to guess that we were in for a big summer storm. As timid as my mother sometimes was, she loved a good storm. She and Dad sat at a long table in the living room, drinking wine by candlelight and holding hands. Any minute now they would start smooching, which I had no interest in witnessing. Instead, I hid in an overstuffed chair by the fireplace, where I had privacy and where I was far away from candles (as per Hugin's warning).

Crack!

An ear-splitting thunderbolt hit close to the house, scattering the cats, who looked for cover under the couch. I looked at my parents, but they did not seem too concerned. They talked in hushed voices and lit another candle as the electric lights dimmed for a moment. It was not a good sign. I decided to read the message in the flask one more time before the power went out.

Crack!

The power went out. Darn it.

"I'll go get the flashlight from the truck." Dad got up and stumbled to the door, holding a dripping candle.

"Ouch!" he gave a yelp and dropped the candle, which rolled on the floor and went out with a hiss.

"What's wrong, honey? Did you burn yourself?" Mom ran to his rescue.

"It's the doorknob ... It must be charged with electricity," he said and stepped back.

The house shook under an attack of gusting wind, and the front door blew open.

“Excellent!” Dad seized the opportunity and ran out to get the flashlight. Mom peeked out into the dark to admire a sudden flash of purple lightning, but she quickly ducked back in when sheets of rain started pouring down on her.

“I got it,” Dad panted when he stomped into the hallway. “Close the door, but don’t touch the knob,” he instructed Mom.

“Wait! There’s a cat outside,” I heard her say, and the flashlight was pointed at something on the front porch.

“Looks like an old yellow tomcat. Poor thing. Look at his tattered ears. And he only has one eye too,” she said sympathetically.

“What’s a cat doing out in this weather?” Dad wondered and then gave another yelp. “He bit me!”

“What? Where?” Mom pointed the flashlight onto Dad’s foot.

“On my big toe. What if he has rabies?” he wailed.

“Oh no ...”

“Am I going to die?” Now he sounded scared. Safe in my chair in front of a cozy fire, I chuckled at my parents’ antics.

“Don’t be silly,” Mom suppressed a laugh. “Henrietta has escaped. Close the door, for crying out loud, before the other cats get big ideas. Come, I will clean the wound.”

Momentarily forgotten by my parents, who were sorting out the cat drama, I added another stick of driftwood to the fire. Its orange glow was reassuringly warm in the surrounding darkness, and it was bright enough that it allowed me to read. The wind sent a shower of raindrops down the chimney in a futile attempt

to extinguish the flames. I leaned closer, determined to fill in the gaps in the poem. As if the flames were writing them, a string of previously unseen words seeped through the heated paper.

Non nobis solum ...

Only one language could have been so solemn and timeless, even if I did not understand it. I gave the Latin phrase in front of me my best try.

"Non nobis solum, sed omnibus."

The wind howled with the voices of a thousand furies unleashed on the cowering world, and my words echoed inexplicably in the now-dark living room. Was there someone else here with me?

Suddenly I felt an urgent need to go upstairs, bolt the door and burrow under my blanket. I was not sure what kind of trouble I was in, but I had an inkling it was the kind Hugin had hinted at. A sneaky thought raised its hand, asking to be heard. What if by explicitly telling me not to do something, he had in fact caused me, or even wanted me, to do it? My hand reached for the old iron poker leaning against the fireplace. On a night like this, when strange things were afoot, a solid poker might come in handy.

"Nicky, are you still down here?" Mom's voice came from the direction of the staircase. She was waving the flashlight around, and I ran to her eagerly.

"Yes, but I am ready to go upstairs," I said in a small voice.

"Come on up then. Dad is going to be fine; it's just a small bite. He will be as right as rain in a day or two."

"What about Henrietta?" I asked and looked at the front door, which was vibrating slightly as if an invisible hand were trying to open it from the outside. I shivered.

"I guess she wants to spend the night in the storm and get drenched. She will be back in the morning. Don't worry," Mom assured me and motioned for me to go upstairs.

The remaining four cats were waiting for me in my bedroom, nonplussed by the elements unleashed outside. Mom offered me the flashlight, but in the end we agreed to leave it in the hallway in case one of us needed to go to the bathroom during the night.

"What's with the poker?" she asked. "Do you need garlic too?"

"Um ... why?"

"It wards off vampires. And if none show up, you can always put it on your toast in the morning."

That made me chuckle, and I felt my anxiety disperse. I let Mom tuck me in and watched her close the door. I had forgotten to ask her about the antique mirror. Oh well, it could wait till tomorrow. The cats jumped onto my bed one by one, settling in and doing some last-minute grooming. I whispered to them about the strange cat on the front porch and how Henrietta had decided to see the storm for herself. I dared not repeat the words that had appeared to me in the fire.

In the gloom, the rafters creaked and the walls of the house shook as the storm raged on. Despite its ferocity, the storm had a soothing effect on my overstimulated nerves. I started drifting away, my last thoughts going to all the creatures who were out in the cold.

The deep sleep did not last very long.

Something woke me in the dead of the night, and for a while I just lay there, listening. There was the occasional rumble of the retreating storm, amplified by the powerful snores coming from my parents' bedroom. I swept my hand over the blanket. At least one cat

was still on my bed, and, judging by its weight, it was Samilian. Where were the others?

I sat up. A tail thumped in the dark, and a paw slipped on smooth glass. Three cats sat at the foot of the old mirror, watching it intently. I got out of bed and approached the oval shape on the wall. What were they looking at? It was just a mirror ...

A purple glow seemed to ripple across its surface. Was it a reflection? I stepped closer. Or was it coming from the inside? My fingers touched the scrying mirror. There was a sense of rushing air, like a gust of wind on an open plain, and darkness studded with constellations I had never seen before. Someone approached from the other side: a billowing cloak, a hooded face. The cats growled.

“Come into the mirror,” the cloak commanded me.

Cold sweat trickled down my spine, and nameless dread caged my heart. The cats were yowling now, but the cloaked one ignored them. I tried to break free and run away, but my feet were petrified and would not move. The entity made an impatient, almost-greedy gesture.

“Let me in,” it hissed. Panic engulfed me, and I wanted to strike the glass.

A thin blue blade sliced the night in half and barred my access to the mirror.

“I would not do that if I were you,” a deep, melodious voice with a faint echo to it advised me.

I blinked, suddenly free, and took a hasty step back. The cloaked one inside the mirror had diminished in size but still hoped to gain an edge.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“*What*, not who,” said the owner of the blue sword. “A dark shadow in need of a face. In need of a young life.”

“Um ... I am rather fond of mine,” I hugged myself. “What should I do now?”

“Throw the mirror into the ocean or bury it in the ground. But do not break it. There will only be more of *them*.”

The tip of the ghostly blade hovered in front of the mirror, causing the dark entity inside it to writhe and change shape. I could not stand to look at it much longer. Remembering an old tradition by which people covered mirrors in the house of a deceased person, I grabbed the sheet from my bed and threw it over the scrying mirror. There, that should do it.

The cats followed me around like shadows, and now that Cloak had been contained, they tried to corner Deep Voice, whose pale outline was hovering an inch above the floor.

The poker. It was leaning against my dresser, and I rushed to it hastily. Deep Voice watched me with bemused interest as I held the black piece of iron in front of me in a stance I hoped my uncle Bo would have approved of.

The blue blade swished through the air and sent the poker flying out of my hands. It hit the wall with a thud and clanged down to the floor. My parents would be up in a second, I was certain. They would go ballistic about the mirror and this new ghost, and I would be grounded till the end of the summer, with no hope of finding the treasure.

Incredibly, there was just a minor pause in my dad’s snoring and a cough from my mother, who had allergies.

“Why did you call me?” the pale ghost asked.

“I didn’t ...” I started to protest, and then my voice trailed off. Hugin ... Candlelight was just a small flame and ignorant me had whipped out the poem in front of

a fire. I had really done it this time. An explanation was necessary.

“I am completely innocent, I swear. I dropped a cannon ball on an old trunk, which I had to buy, but it only cost \$10 so I still have \$10 left, and then my mother bought the mirror and put it in my room, and I forgot to mention there was a message in a flask in the false bottom of the trunk, and then Hugin said not to read it by candlelight, but the storm caused a power outage, and I had no choice but to read the poem by the fire, and the Latin words practically said themselves. I am really sorry, sir.”

The flood of words met with silence, which was growing louder by the second. The storm had moved on by now, and a quick look at the balcony door showed me the sky was clear and dotted with merry stars. Had I really just spoken to a ghost?

The blue sword got sheathed, and its owner stepped into the starlight. He wore a hood, but he lowered it for me and I could see he was a tall, thin man with not an unkind face. A strange feeling of recognition passed between us, even though we had never met before. He held out his right hand, but I hesitated, and he put it over his heart instead.

“Jean Baptiste de Saisi,” he introduced himself. A Frenchman then, judging by his name and accent.

“Nick Reed. *Je ne parle pas français*,” I added apologetically.

“Isn’t this a bilingual country?” The ghost of Jean Baptiste de Saisi sounded amused.

“It is, and I really wanted to sign up for French classes, but all they offer in Destiny is Ukrainian dancing. And perogy cooking classes.”

Was I actually talking about perogies? I had to stay focused.

“What does *Non nobis solum, sed omnibus* mean?” I asked, referring to the Latin phrase in the poem.

“Not for us but for everyone,” came a soft answer. There was a gulf of pain behind it, and I remained silent until Jean Baptiste was ready to speak again. He sighed as if he had just reached a difficult decision.

“This is curious, and I do not understand why it has happened, but here we are. If Hugin is your friend, and I assume Munin is involved too, I will give you a chance,” he said.

“A chance to find the treasure?” I was electrified.

He raised his hand to indicate that I should hold my horses.

“Find the cross and you will find the sword. Find the sword and you will find me,” he said cryptically.

“But you are standing right ...” *here*, I was going to argue, when the mysterious Jean Baptiste vanished into the dark.

A cold nose pressed into my calf and brought me back to my senses. The cats had been listening all this time, ready to claw any more intruders at my command. My head was still reeling from all that had transpired, my heart elated at the encounter with Jean Baptiste. I was in dire need of some fresh air. I opened the sliding door and stepped out onto the wet balcony. The world had never smelled so good, so clean. I filled my lungs with the briny air and vowed to my cats: “We’re launching the expedition first thing in the morning. And we had better get more sourdough.”

CHAPTER 7

It was a windy morning after the previous night's storm. Whitecapped waves rushed to the shore and washed over boulders that resembled dice cast by giants. Myriads of raindrops hung from branches and blades of grass and pooled at the bottom of flower cups, inviting small winged creatures to have a drink.

On a power line above a paved driveway two ravens sat, preening their feathers.

"I feel storms have such a cleansing effect on me," Munin mused.

"Indeed. I practically pooped when lightning hit near the old smithy," Hugin recalled.

"But that place has been empty for a long time. There is no iron there anymore."

"Its memories are still there. It was born there and shaped there, and it came to die there when its useful life was over."

"Is that what caused the shift in the island's quantum field?"

Hugin considered his brother's question. When a billion volts of electricity blast a place like Talon Island, things that have been asleep for a long time wake up. Doorways open that cannot be closed until the next storm slams them shut. Last night was such an occasion, but the long-term outcome was difficult to predict.

Hugin shifted his weight and looked down to watch something white go *splat* on a fancy red car parked beneath.

“Bull’s eye!” Munin squawked appreciatively. “Is that a BMW 7 Series?”

“Limited edition, I should think. It just needed a slight modification.”

The ravens saw a movement in the tall grass in the ditch by the road. A round face with a pointy chin emerged, followed by a graceful, if chubby, feline body and a bushy tail. Henrietta the cat surveyed the manicured lawn before her and set out striding diagonally to the villa on the other side. She did not seem to have noticed the two ravens who watched her with growing interest.

“Should we tell her about the resident poodle?” Munin asked.

“Sir Prance a Lot? She can handle a perfumed show dog like him.”

“I would not judge a book by its cover. I am told he used to run with a gang down in Mexico. Los Lobos, they were called. Wolves.”

“Who told you that?” Hugin stared at his brother in disbelief.

“I am obviously not at liberty to reveal my trusted source. Sir Lancelot here is under a government witness protection program.”

“But dogs cannot testify. How ...” Hugin’s voice trailed off. “He identified someone by *smell*?”

“The gang’s leader, no less.”

“How did he end up on Talon Island?”

“Miss Maelstrom adopted him from an animal shelter near Truro, thinking he was an orphaned dog left behind by a Mexican maid who got deported.”

“I think I know who your contact is,” Hugin grinned. “That parrot Plato who lives with the retired Interpol agent.”

Munin ruffled up his feathers, clearly annoyed but not surprised by Hugin's razor-sharp intelligence.

"I will neither confirm nor deny your assumption. Let's go see what that cat is doing."

They flew down from the power line and walked through the grass daintily, hopping over the last stretch. Then they peeked around the corner. A woman was seated on a redwood deck with her eyes closed, her legs and arms in a lotus pose. Visible from the deck was a beautifully designed Zen garden. There were rocks representing mountains, surrounded by soft sand that had been raked into wavelike patterns. Vivian Maelstrom, a former ballerina who had quit at the height of her career to marry a Wall Street banker only to divorce him a year before the stock market crashed, understood about perfect timing. She was now just a few heartbeats away from achieving nirvana.

Henrietta approached stealthily, head level with her body, tail at half-mast. She had been out all night and badly needed to pee. She squatted and let the steaming stream irrigate a row of pink flowers. A whiff of wet carpet mixed with an awful perfume reached her delicate nose. *A dog who has been to a spa.* She looked in the direction of a garage that had a miniature castle with turrets attached to it. She gave it a wide berth and came to a halt at the edge of a strange sand patch. Its obvious softness invited her to dip her paws in. This was what a cat like her deserved. She jumped onto a protruding rock and noticed shapes curving through the sand. They were all wrong. Water, real or implied, did not run like that, not when it heard the song of the great ocean. Henrietta got to work.

"Woof! Rarrrrr ... Woof!"

“Lancelot, you silly dog! I was trying to meditate, in case you did not notice.” Vivian’s voice had the quality of a power drill, and it made the dog wince. But Sir Lancelot, a former member of Los Lobos, had not won a score of nasty fights in the back alleys of Tijuana only to back off in the presence of a cat. A cat! In his territory! Itchy from the atrocious perfume, choked by the zirconstudded collar and utterly humiliated by his manicured claws, he lost control and raced after the cheeky cat with relish.

“Lancelot! Come back here this minute!” Vivian’s voice whipped through the morning air. “Oh no, my Zen garden ... That’s it!”

The ravens, mercifully unnoticed by everyone, laughed under their wings as the irate woman picked up her yoga mat and hurled it off the deck, stomping her little ballerina feet. Then she went inside and returned with a scooper and a plastic bag. She knelt down in the sand and dug furiously.

“What’s she looking for?” Munin whispered to his brother.

“Evidence,” Hugin said grimly.

CHAPTER 8

ALL three of us slept late after the big storm: my dad because his foot needed to heal, my mom because she had to take care of everybody all the time and me because of my ghostly adventures. The moment I woke up I reached for my journal and wrote down detailed notes about my encounter with Jean Baptiste de Saisi. I pondered over his words: “Find the cross and you will find the sword. Find the sword and you will find me.”

Was I looking for a grave? Perhaps the treasure had been buried with Jean Baptiste, along with his sword, which his ghost still carried. A cross and a sword ... Where had I seen that before?

I would have to canvass Talon Island and ask the locals if they knew about a cemetery or a solitary grave that dated back at least three centuries. I had no way of knowing when Jean Baptiste had lived, but his clothes had gone out of fashion a long time ago.

Would Hugin and Munin know something about the knight's cross and sword? Perhaps they would agree to do some aerial surveillance on my behalf.

A shy knock on my door came, followed by my mom in pyjamas and thick socks, which she wore even in summer. One look at the covered mirror and she knew I had been up to something.

“What's this?” she said and pulled down the bedsheet. She gasped at the sight of a diagonal scratch across the

glass surface. I came closer to inspect it. Had it been caused by the ghostly sword?

"Mom," I took the initiative, "I saw something scary in the mirror last night. The cats saw it too."

"And is that why you scratched it?"

"Um, yes," I lied.

"Nice try, slick," she said, "but the scratch is on the inside. No, the house was shaking in the storm and the mirror must have cracked. What am I supposed to do with it now? It was such a good deal ... Margaret practically gave it to me for free," she sighed.

Remembering Jean Baptiste's advice, I suggested, "Let's throw it into the ocean or bury it in the backyard."

Mom chuckled and ruffled the hair on top of my head.

"You have quite the imagination. But you are right that I should take it away. Broken mirrors bring bad luck. I will put it in the woodshed for now."

She grabbed the ruined mirror and walked sideways through the door. Just then Dad appeared, stepping gingerly on his bitten foot. I signalled to him urgently. When Mom was gone, he sat down on my bed and stretched out his leg. I reached under my pillow and pulled out the small flask.

"Dad, I managed to open it. There was something inside. Look."

"A message from a castaway?" he said, and it was a pretty accurate guess, metaphorically speaking.

"No. Even better. I think it is a rhyming treasure map."

The tiny scroll was gently removed and unrolled and the text of the poem inspected.

"It's ... interesting but rather vague on coordinates," Dad said diplomatically, trying not to hurt my feelings.

"I want to find it," I replied with determination.

"Hmm, I would like to help you, but I have so much work to do, and now my foot hurts too. Maybe later?"

"You don't believe in it, do you?" I challenged him. Of course Dad did not have the benefit of knowing about the ghost, and I was not at liberty to reveal Jean Baptiste's existence. Not until I had passed his test.

"Son, there is no doubt there are pockets of treasure hidden underground in Nova Scotia. It was a favourite place for pirates and Spanish ships to stop before they sailed back to Europe. But look at Oak Island. So many people have wasted time and money digging up the Money Pit and found nothing. They could not even agree on its precise location."

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly feeling curious.

"Some believe the Money Pit was just a booby-trapped ruse to steer people's attention away from the real location. Supposedly there was a rock shaped like a human skull found on the island, along with several boulders in a cross formation. I believe the cross lay northeast to southwest. The treasure could have easily been underneath it."

"Dad, you are a genius!" I jumped up and gave him a hug.

"Whoa, careful, my toe ..." he smiled, pleased that he was still my hero.

If he was right, and I was sure he was, there could very well be a similar cross on Talon Island. All I had to do was locate four boulders that formed a cross on the ground. Hastily, I found my notebook and scribbled down a note about finding a stone cross and possibly a rock shaped like a skull. There was something else I wanted to ask Dad about.

“What did you mean by booby-trapped?”

“The Money Pit is somehow connected with the bottom of Oak Island, because at a certain depth it always flooded with sea water. There is also a theory that the builders put flood channels in place that siphon water in from Smith’s Cove.”

“Does anyone know how to stop the water from coming in?” I asked.

He shook his head to indicate no.

“Even if the Money Pit is a decoy, it is still a very clever design – one that no one has been able to reverse engineer to this date. It makes me wonder if pirates were smart enough to do it.”

“If not pirates, then who?” I was hanging on his every word.

“Templars,” he stated simply. “One sample of coconut fibre that was removed from Oak Island was carbon dated to the 13th or 14th century. Templars were renowned for their building skills. I have seen their castle and fortifications in Rhodes. I should take you there sometime.”

I did a quick subtraction in my head, and my eyes went wide when I realized Dad was talking about something that had happened 700 years ago.

Could Jean Baptiste de Saisi be that old and, more importantly, could he have been a Templar?

“Dad, who were the Templars?”

“They were warrior monks who fought in the medieval crusades. Their order became rich and powerful, but it was destroyed by the French king Philip IV. He coveted their treasure and was ready to confiscate it, only it had gone missing. Templars were then interrogated and tortured, to no avail. As far as I know their treasure has never been found.”

For a brief moment I was stunned and unable to process all the implications of this new information. If Jean Baptiste truly was a Templar knight, then the treasure he guarded was a very famous one. What were my chances of finding it if no one else had been able to locate it? I straightened my back and squared my shoulders. I had what all the other treasure seekers did not – a budding friendship with two special ravens. From now on discretion was of paramount importance.

“Dad, what did the Templars look like?”

“The ones that were knights wore white, while the non-noble sergeants dressed in black. All of them wore a red cross. The white mantle with a red cross was probably their most famous identifier.”

Red cross in a white field ... Suddenly I knew where I had seen such a thing.

“Christopher Columbus’ ships had white sails with a red cross,” I said, “so does that mean that he was a Templar too?”

“It’s a stretch. Columbus was sailing with the blessing of the Catholic Church, so the cross could have meant just that. No one knows what happened to the Templars who escaped with the treasure, although Scotland and Portugal were safe places for them to go.”

Or Nova Scotia.

“Let’s get some breakfast. I’m hungry,” Dad said, and I agreed. All this talk about ancient history and treasure had made me ravenous.

We were halfway through our breakfast when a loud knock on the front door resounded. Someone on the front porch was using the brass knocker shaped like a fish to shake up the whole house. After three loud bangs, the knocker fell off. We congregated in the hallway and

opened the door just a crack. A rubber boot wedged itself in the door.

“Your cat pooped in my Zen garden! And now my poodle, Sir Lancelot, has run off!”

We stared at the woman who was holding a plastic bag with evidence of cat crime in one hand and the feline perpetrator in the other. Henrietta the cat automatically assumed the shape of wet noodles, looking slightly bewildered and unsure that she liked such attention. I took her away from the horrid neighbour whom I recognized from our brief encounter on day one.

“Excuse me, how do you know it was our cat? She has only been missing since last night,” Dad came to the rescue.

“I saw her, that’s how. I was meditating on my back porch when she came and started digging.”

“We are so sorry, Mrs. ...” Mom, the family peacemaker, started to say.

“*Miss*. Miss Vivian Maelstrom.”

“We are very sorry, Miss Maelstrom. Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?”

“Perhaps,” the woman said a little less sharply. “But what about my dog? He has a very expensive collar that I would not want to lose.”

Miss Maelstrom was more worried about the collar than the dog himself. Poor Sir Lancelot. Who knew what she would do to him when he returned home? An intervention was necessary.

“I will go and find him if you give me his leash,” I offered. My proposal was sincere, but I also wanted a reason to romp around the island and look for unusual rocks in a cross formation.

“That is a great idea,” Mom agreed. “And while Nicky looks for your dog, I can help you repair the garden,” she added.

With nothing left to argue about, Miss Maelstrom stepped inside our rental house and followed my parents to the kitchen. I noticed she had not removed her boots.

Equipped with a sandwich, a dog leash, a map and a notebook, I ventured outside. I was secretly hoping Hugin and Munin would be of assistance in both searches – one for a runaway dog and the other for an elusive medieval treasure.

On a small island news travels fast. When I rounded the corner of our driveway, Munin was already waiting for me on a rock surrounded by tall irises.

“The poodle has sailed,” he said in that grating voice of his. “He’s the new deckhand on *Sea Dog*.”

“Where does he think he is going?” I asked.

“Tijuana, Mexico.”

“What now?”

“Meet us on the other side of the island,” screeched a second voice from above. Hugin was zipping by, followed by a chaotic flock of gulls. This was going to be a busy morning.

CHAPTER 9

AS it happened, the path leading to the other side of the island began at the edge of the Seaboyers' property. Mrs. Seaboyer seemed glad to see me, even though I told her I did not want to buy anything. She confirmed that her son, Joel, had found a poodle and together they were sailing on *Sea Dog* to learn "Peggy's route," whatever that meant. Mrs. Seaboyer thought I had about an hour before the boat returned to port.

Now I stood at the edge of a silent forest and, after a moment of hesitation, parted tall ferns and stepped onto a deer trail. I was not what you could call an experienced woodsman, but I felt confident that I could find my way. Walking slowly and carefully so as to not get stuck in thorn bushes, I let my spirit free under the old trees. Sunlight was playing a game of shadows among swaying and creaking pines. They were stunted, probably because they were growing so close to the coast, their limbs covered with pale-green lichens.

Before long the sound of the ocean intensified and I could hear its roar as it shattered against invisible rocks. I was headed in the right direction. The ground sloped in the last stretch, laced with tree roots I used as steps. I climbed over a fallen tree trunk and pushed through prickly branches. The piercing blue of the sky and ocean stretching everywhere took my breath away. I was grateful the ravens had wanted me to see Talon Island as it must have looked centuries ago, wild and beautiful in the face of merciless elements.

It was only too easy to imagine a knight standing by that round boulder that balanced perfectly at the edge of a cliff under which the emerald sea churned and frothed – or a one-eyed Norse god seated on a blanket of moss, listening to two ravens whispering in his ears.

I wished the other side of the island were mine, if only to protect it from development. Was it for sale? Even if it were, I could never afford it – especially after I had sworn to the ravens that I would never profit from the treasure.

A high, shrill cry came from my left, and I turned, expecting a gull pursued by Hugin and Munin. It was them all right, but it was not a gull they were after. An eagle zipped by with a nonplussed look about him, as if the ravens on his tail were mere flies. I waved my arms and jumped up and down, hoping the two brothers would see me.

Just then *Sea Dog* came around the corner with Joel Seaboyer on board. I rubbed my eyes in case I had seen wrong, but, no, he really did have a bonnet on his head. Snippets of sharp barking on the wind told me Sir Lancelot was there with him, presumably scaring off the gulls that were trailing after the boat. I waved at *Sea Dog* but in vain. If I wore a bonnet, I, too, would pretend not to see anyone.

The ravens were coming back, flying at full speed. They descended in a spiral and landed on top of the round boulder. I ran to them, eager to share the news of the ghost.

“Hugin, Munin, why were you chasing that eagle?” I asked after I had caught my breath.

“We got tired of the eagles and gulls stealing our food,” Hugin said.

“Turf wars,” Munin added darkly. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world, young friend. So, what’s for brunch?”

I smiled, as they looked pointedly at my pockets, and pulled out a sandwich. I split it between them and stayed silent while they ate. Hugin was eating his food slowly, but Munin was passing it down his throat as if on a conveyor belt.

“Last night I met Jean Baptiste de Saisi,” I stated simply.

Hugin pierced me with those gimlet eyes of his, while Munin coughed up some of his sandwich.

“Oh you did, did you? What did I tell you?” Hugin said scathingly.

“Not to read the poem by candlelight,” I replied, “and I complied. I stayed as far away from candles as possible. I read it by the fireplace instead.”

“Ha!”

“That reminds me of when our grandma told us not to play in the dumpster behind a pizza parlour,” Munin chuckled.

“Do tell,” I prompted him.

“She told us not to *play* there, but she did not say we could not *eat* there. Then one day Hugin saw this perfectly good pizza sitting in a box in the dumpster and told me to go get it. Just as I was about to fly out, the wind blew the dumpster cover shut and I was trapped inside.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“He ate the pizza while I called 9-1-1,” Hugin said dryly.

“The look on the fire chief’s face when he saw a raven instead of a little boy was epic!” Munin hooted.

“The thrashing Grandma gave us afterwards was epic,” Hugin shook his head mournfully.

“But you pulled together and survived,” I pointed out. “That is what I want us to do too. Join our talents and knowledge to find the cross and the sword of Jean Baptiste de Saisi.”

“Uh-oh,” said Hugin.

“He told you about the cross and the sword? That means,” Munin turned to his brother, “that Nicky is the one ...”

They whispered to each other and looked excited and uneasy at the same time. There was something they were not telling me, either because they could not or would not. I thought about Oak Island’s Money Pit – how every time someone dug into it, more water welled up. If the decoy pit had been designed with such ingenuity, what of the actual treasure site? It would be impenetrable. I had to earn Jean Baptiste’s approval, as only he knew the 700-year-old secret.

“Hugin, Munin, I have a theory ...” I began and unfolded the map of the island I had brought with me. Then I told them about the stone cross on Oak Island and they listened with interest, occasionally pecking at the map to see if it was edible.

“Is there a rock on Talon Island that looks like a human skull?” I asked them.

“No,” Hugin replied.

“How about a rock with a cross carved in it?”

“No,” Munin shook his head sadly.

“However ...” Hugin said and looked at his brother, who nodded imperceptibly.

“There is a special rock, but it does not look like a skull or have markings in it?” I guessed. I could see they were only going to give me yes and no answers.

The two brothers nodded in unison and then did something very strange. They started pecking at the

rock they were sitting on. I stepped back to take a better look at it and smacked myself on the head. Of course! An unusually round boulder that could not have been formed naturally ... Someone had shaped it and smoothed it and positioned it precariously at the edge of a sheer drop, making it visible to ships coming from the open ocean.

Not wanting to lose another second, I marked the spot as best as I could on my map, showing it to the ravens in case they wanted to make a correction. With my pen poised over the map of the tiny island, I made another X at the edge of Seal Cove. It was the place where I had seen the pyramid rock on our first day. To form a cross I had to locate another two points.

“A round rock in the south, a pyramid rock in the east ... That leaves us with west and north. I say we search the western part first. I am not so sure about the north ...”

I pointed at the map again, where the island came close to the mainland. The rock would have to be near the causeway ... in the ocean. I lifted my eyes and looked at the two ravens.

“It’s underwater,” Hugin admitted, “ocean levels rising, you see.”

“But I should still be able to see it at low tide, which is ...?”

“Midday,” Munin chimed in, “except it’s going to get foggy.”

On cue, a forlorn sound came from the open ocean, and all three of us turned in that direction.

“What is that?” I wondered.

“Foghorn,” Hugin explained.

“Let’s go then! I must see at least one more rock before I can draw a cross. I will follow the coast and you

can fly ahead," I urged and stuffed the map in my back pocket.

Hugin took off and beat his wings, seeking an updraft, but Munin stayed behind. "Can I ride on your shoulder?" he asked almost abashedly.

"Oh ... Sure."

I worried for a moment that he would peck me or scratch me, but he was very deft and made himself comfortable on my shoulder as if he had always sat there. We set out on a narrow path following the coastline on the west side.

"So how exactly did Clan Raven get involved with Jean Baptiste de Saisi?" I asked Munin as we walked among heath and treacherous rocks.

"It all started with Yngvi, our ancestor," Munin replied and twitched. "He used to ride on Jean Baptiste's shoulder."

"And now you are riding on mine," I nodded with satisfaction.

"The lonely knight taught Yngvi French and some English, in return for company."

"How did Jean Baptiste come to Nova Scotia in the first place?" I wondered.

"Well, he was not the first, I assure you. Think three centuries earlier."

"Vikings?"

Munin did not reply, but I knew I was right. In Newfoundland there is a place called L'Anse aux Meadows, where the Norse built an entire settlement. Had the ravens' ancestors arrived with them?

"Munin, how did your kind end up in Atlantic Canada?"

He looked around and, not seeing his brother anywhere near, said conspiratorially: "I am glad you

asked me first, instead of Hugin. He is mighty touchy on the subject.”

“Go on ...”

“There was a raucous feast ... The historical Hugin drank too much mead. When he regained consciousness, he found himself on a *drakkar* bound west.”

“Did he enlist while he was drunk?”

“Or he was abducted. I am not sure. The memories from that era are rather sketchy. I have attempted to access them numerous times.”

“What if the god Odin himself had gifted the ravens to the crew to make sure the Vikings would succeed or to send his ravens to safety? He was always worried about you two.”

“That is a distinct possibility,” Munin nodded.

“Munin, why are memories so unreliable?”

“Aha! I am glad you asked. My theory is that memories are largely based on emotions, and those are never logical. That is why Jean Baptiste, like so many other people in history, chose stones for record keeping.”

“And nobody ever came to look for him? The other exiled knights, I mean.”

“They did, but their ship sank. We never had the heart to tell him. It was a second-hand, or second- wing, report from gulls, and they were as dim-witted then as they are now.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say about your fellow birds ...”

“Allow me to quote: ‘*Non-food big floating tree go down over there.*’”

“But wouldn’t Jean Baptiste want to know what had happened? He has been waiting for them here all this time when he could have gone to heaven.”

“No, he would not. He is the guardian, and he cannot leave until ...”

“Yes?”

Munin sighed and looked away. I waited for the other shoe to drop.

“He cannot leave until a new guardian takes his place. Hugin tried to warn you.”

I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise. What had I gotten myself into now?

“This guardianship ... Is it a posthumous job?” I asked, trying to sound casual instead of scared.

“Gosh no,” Munin chuckled, “but lifelong service is required. Ah, we are almost there.”

We came upon a clearing that ran all the way to the edge of Black Cove. Marine fog was coming in, dropping its veils on treetops. Hugin was already waiting for us, perched on a blackened rock that had the approximate shape of a pyramid. Munin indicated he wanted down, and I helped him get off my shoulder. Then I took out my map and marked a third X. Now all I had to do was wait for the low tide and find the fourth one.

The fog thickened and sang ... That was strange because fog normally does not do that. Something moved in it ... or, rather, someone. Then I heard the drumming. A low, rhythmic beat that synchronized with the pace of my heart. It was a native drum.

She stepped out of the fog, an apparition in a long dress, with a raven-black mane spread over her shoulders, a single streak of white hair on her right temple. It was a woman, not a ghost, and I felt a wave of relief. She studied me with a faint smile.

“You are seeking something,” she said finally, listening to voices I could not hear.

“Um, hello. I am Nick Reed. I apologize for trespassing on your property, Ma’am. I was looking at some rocks.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nick Reed. I am Ariel.”

“Ariel de la Mer?”

She seemed surprised that I knew her name and gestured for me to follow her. At the edge of the forest stood a tiny red house with a purple door and a crumbling chimney on which Hugin and Munin now sat, listening.

“Do you have a cat?” I asked, pointing at the flap set in the door.

“No, but I will soon. If it can fit into this little house ... Wait here, I will be right back.”

She went inside, and I heard the cascading sound of things crashing. In a house that size it was inevitable. When she stepped out again, the drum was gone and she was giving me a sheet of paper.

“What is it?” I asked.

“An invitation. Give it to your mother.”

I folded it twice and put it in my back pocket. It was probably some fundraiser or a gallery showing, or both. I was sure my mom would appreciate an artsy outing. That reminded me of the strange paintings by Ariel I had seen in the library.

“Did you like them?” she asked, and I blinked.

“Are you reading my mind? Because I was just about to mention your art.”

“No, I don’t read minds. It’s more of a temporal-shift problem. Sometimes I am ahead of myself in time, but sometimes I am drifting into the past. It can be very inconvenient.”

“Wow.”

“I know. I have always been like that, even as a child. My grandfather said I had the gift, but my mother

wanted me to have a normal life, and so she took me to Montreal. I am half-French, half-L'nuwey."

"The drum ... I thought it was native."

"It is very old. When I inherited this house, the drum was the first thing I saw when I walked in. I think it is a relic of a bygone era."

"Perhaps the era is not quite gone," I ventured, "if you are here to keep it alive."

She nodded slowly and looked in the direction of the ocean, which had gone very quiet under the creeping fog.

"Ariel, why did you paint the ravens with beaded headbands?" I asked.

"Because they are important – they are family," she gave an enigmatic answer.

I would have asked her more had it not been for the sound of a boat passing by, which I figured must be *Sea Dog* in a rush to get home before the fog obliterated everything.

"I am sorry, but I have to go ..."

"Come again, Nick Reed," Ariel smiled and watched me sprint down a path that I hoped would lead straight to the dirt road near Seaboyers' Emporium. I looked over my shoulder to see if the ravens were following me, but they were no longer there.

When I arrived at the emporium, the boat had already been tied to a mooring and Joel Seaboyer was hefting a big plastic tub with diving gear. Chester was with him and nodded at me when he saw me approach.

"Is Sir Lancelot here somewhere?" I asked and dangled the dog leash.

"The poodle? He is in my pickup," Joel said and added, "I thought he was a stray."

"You should not let your dog run around without a leash," Chester said. "It's a dangerous world."

"Oh, he is not my ..." *dog*, I was about to correct him, but he had already turned away.

I walked to a rusty pickup truck parked on the side of the dirt road and was greeted by Sir Lancelot, a paragon of canine good nature and loyalty. He was happy to be sitting in the driver's seat, his paws on the steering wheel, tongue lolling.

It broke my heart to tear him away from his new friend, Joel Seaboyer, who must have had something Vivian Maelstrom did not possess. Fortunately the poodle did not protest when I clipped the leash onto his expensive collar, and he went with me willingly. He must have had a really good time aboard *Sea Dog* as he was still buoyed by the endorphins.

"Let's get you home, buddy." I tugged at his leash, and together we walked down the road.

"Mom," I called out when I saw her and Miss Maelstrom standing in the latter's driveway.

"Ah, you found my dog," Miss Maelstrom said and accepted the leash.

"He went for a boat ride. I think he gets bored and that if he had more adventures, he would not try to run away."

"Hmm," came from Miss Maelstrom.

"You could hire me to walk him from time to time," I suggested, always willing to earn a few bucks.

"It's a deal."

Remembering Ariel, I reached into my back pocket and gave the folded piece of paper to my mom. She read it and then showed it to Miss Maelstrom, who raised her eyebrows. They were acting as if they had become best

friends, which was a disturbing thought. I was not sure I liked Miss Maelstrom.

“Mom,” I tugged at my mother’s sleeve, “I want to go look at an interesting rock up the road. May I?”

“Sure, but it’s getting really foggy. Don’t stay too long.”

I nodded happily and waved at the two women, who started talking in hushed voices.

It was very windy on the causeway on account of there being no protection from the elements. The fog had engulfed Shut In Island, and I could only see its faint outlines in the milky distance. Hugin and Munin were hovering above the waters from which the tip of a rock was sticking out. I assumed this was the fourth stone marker. I drew an X on my map and then a line between each set of points. The result was a simple cross with arms of the same length, positioned northwest to southwest. I traced the cross slowly and, on a hunch, lengthened its body. I sucked in my breath.

The cross turned into a sword with its tip buried in Shut In Island.

CHAPTER 10

MRS. Reed was walking down the island road to Black Cove beach. It was getting dark, and she wondered if dancing under the moon with the other women was such a great idea. It had seemed that way when she first read the flyer her son, Nicky, had given her. Even Vivian Maelstrom was going to be there. But now she felt a little silly and reluctant to leave her boys behind.

Her thoughts circled back to Nicky, who had been acting very strangely since he had found that old flask with a poem inside it. She knew there was a distinct possibility that there was a bit of treasure hidden in Nova Scotia, but she would rather her son not find it. Life was not about finding a jug with medieval coins. A boy his age should be running around with his friends, getting fresh air and having fun.

Well, Nicky was doing all that, except his friends were not other children but animals. She did not mind that he talked about the cats as if they were people (after all, they were pets and part of the family) or that he had taken a shine to Vivian's poodle. No, it was the ravens that were a little creepy.

Nicky had fed them expensive bread and conversed with them. She had seen it with her own eyes. She had strained her ears in an effort to understand what they were talking about, but all she could hear was the usual raven squawking. And now this treasure was firmly lodged in his mind ... and in her husband's too.

She sighed. She pitied the wives of the men who had spent their lives and probably all their money in the Oak Island Money Pit.

When she left the house, her husband and son were poring over the map of Talon Island and trying to position some kind of cross. Harmless fun, they had told her. She would have a talk with Mrs. Seaboyer and ask her if there was a legend of treasure in these parts.

She hugged her sweater closer to her body when she came closer to the open water. The wind was blowing, and it was rather chilly. In a scraggly tree two ravens sat, their beady eyes watching her silently.

“Shoo!” she said, but the birds only looked at each other and puffed up their feathers.

“Shoo?” Hugin whispered to his brother, who twitched his tail.

There were several other women on the beach, standing in a circle, which was the standard formation when more than two females met in public. They were talking and giggling like little girls and occasionally glancing at the moon to see if it was the right time. The ringleader, a tall woman with black hair, had a drum, and after brief instructions, she led them to a soft sandy spot where they took their shoes off and got ready to dance.

Later that night, when the moon was high in the sky and the black tide glittered with starlight, the women stood ankle deep in the cool water and whispered their wishes into seashells. The most prominent figure was that of Mrs. Seaboyer, who commanded the universe to bring her a miracle that would turn her business around. Heavy with such a mighty wish, her seashell sank straight to the bottom of the ocean.

Next to her, Vivian Maelstrom tossed a few ideas about in her head and settled on the one thing that had

been eluding her since her divorce. *Romance*, she told her little seashell and gave it a gentle kiss before setting it on the water. She sucked her breath in when a shooting star cut through the night. *A good omen!*

Mrs. Reed wondered what she should wish for, but she already had everything a woman could ever ask for. She was happily married, she had a wonderful son ... Yes, Nicky could have her wish.

"I wish ... I wish for my son to find his calling and to be happy with the path he chooses."

Plunk.

The last seashell was picked up by a lapping wave and wobbled away in the direction of Shut In Island.

"That was a good wish," Munin murmured and Hugin nodded. They were sitting on top of a giant boulder and watched with interest as their friend Ariel picked up her drum again and started chanting. There was magic in the air – magic conjured up by women dancing under the nearly full moon.

Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it ...

The next morning, at 11:11 a.m. Atlantic time, a tour bus loaded with Japanese tourists was tearing down Peggy's Cove Road. The driver, Doug Moraesh, was whistling to himself and occasionally glancing in the rear-view mirror. The passengers were mostly women who were visiting Nova Scotia for one day before descending on Cavendish on Prince Edward Island, home of Anne of Green Gables.

A group of spandex-clad men on bicycles was making its way up the hill.

"Idiots," Doug mumbled. The road was narrow as it was, yet the riders acted as if they were on Highway 103. "Oh no ..."

A fat pheasant burst from the thicket on the side of the road and sprinted right between the bicycles and the bus, squawking loudly.

“Hang on to your hats, ladies!” Doug bellowed and slammed on the brakes in an attempt to not squish the hapless bird. The bus swerved and lurched dangerously close to the ditch. The Japanese tourists shouted in alarm but never let go of their recording devices.

An old man in an electric wheelchair with a red flag on a stick was coming down the road from the opposite direction. Doug crossed himself quickly and made the only logical decision available at the time. He would have to take a detour on Talon Island Road.

The sound of an object splintering made him wince. He had hit something. It was a wooden Peggy sign, whose arm was now lodged behind one of the wipers. Doug hoped he could turn the bus around on the small island and apologize to the owner of that lovely sign. If all went well, he might even be able to keep his job. He had no way of knowing that the video of his daunting manoeuvre had already been uploaded to the Internet and tagged as “bus drifting.”

Margaret Seaboyer, too, was whistling under her breath. It was another sunny day, perfect for doing laundry. She broke into a song as she pinned a white bedsheet to the clothesline that stretched from the side of her emporium to the nearest tree. Forget about detergents – there was nothing like the sun to make sheets crispy white.

The noise of a bus winding down the road made her turn around. She clasped her hand to her mouth. It could only mean one thing. Customers!

She tossed the laundry basket aside and ran, waving her arms in a windmill style.

“Joel! Chester! Get your skinny butts out of bed. We’ve got customers!”

By now the tourists had started wondering if this was Peggy’s Cove. The lighthouse was smaller than in the brochures, and there was only one gift shop. However, they trusted the travel agency had arranged something special for them, and they spilled out of the bus full of anticipation.

Doug Moraesh, shaken but relieved that the only casualty had been Peggy’s arm, waited until everyone was out before making a beeline for the impressive woman who was welcoming everyone to Seaboyers’ Emporium, est. 1800.

“Is your mother home, young lady?” he asked, causing Margaret Seaboyer to blush.

“What’s this?” she asked as he handed her the broken wooden arm.

“I am terribly sorry; it was an accident ...” Doug shrugged with a pleading look in his eyes.

Margaret remembered the wish she had made the previous night. Could the universe have heard her and granted her a favour so quickly? If it had, she was prepared to seize this opportunity.

“Accidents happen; it’s okay. Come, you look like you could use a cup of hot coffee.”

Relieved that the owner of the emporium was not talking about reporting the incident to his employer, Doug followed her inside the building, looking around with curiosity. It used to house lobster traps, but now it served as a trap for tourists instead.

The Japanese visitors shared a similar sentiment, stripping parts of the emporium bare. Gone were all the *Braveheart* kilts, as well as the *Titanic* forks and teacups. Someone had even purchased the papier- mâché

mermaid. Chester Seaboyer was busy swiping credit cards and giving change. When no one was looking, he put a small glass case on the counter. He had been forging pirate coins in Margaret's old washing machine, and now was as good a time as any to try to sell them.

Inside the tattoo room, Joel Seaboyer was getting ready to make his debut as Peggy. He prayed that no one he knew would see him or recognize him. He opened the door just a crack, and to his relief he only saw Asian faces. They would go back to their home country at the end of their trip, and he would never see them again.

"For Father," he whispered. He put on his lucky heavy-metal T-shirt and then donned a long nightgown. With some hesitation, he put on a cheap wig and a bonnet. The result was not too shabby. Had it not been for the hairs on the back of his hands and the tattoos, he could pass for Peggy, the young girl who had almost drowned near Peggy's Cove. He let himself out via the back door and headed for the dock.

Two ravens perched on top of Seaboys' Emporium watched the commotion below with interest.

"This place is getting busy," Hugin said.

"It could mean more food," his brother replied.

"He is not going to like it," Hugin shook his head.

"Who?"

"You know who."

Munin knew exactly who his brother was hinting at: the ghost of a 14th-century Templar knight whose spectral existence on this island had been rather uneventful until now.

"Do you see what I see?" Hugin craned his neck to take a better look at Joel Seaboyer dressed like a girl from the pioneer era.

"I did not know it was Halloween," Munin rasped.

“It isn’t,” Hugin twitched. “This should be interesting.”

Local gulls, which had never stopped hoping that *Sea Dog* would go fishing again, started to gather above the boat. They were flying in wide circles high up in the air, whipping themselves into excitement. They were delighted to see Joel, whom they recognized even in his new disguise. He was playing some kind of a game, and they were eager to join in.

Chester Seaboyer announced there would be a boat trip, and before long the first group of tourists crowded around him. He escorted them to *Sea Dog*, which had been modified to serve as a tour vessel. He helped all the women aboard and was the last one to climb on. He would be their tour guide today while his nephew piloted the boat in St. Margaret’s Bay. There was a lot to see and even more history to cover. Chester had brought a megaphone in case the wind prevented him from being heard.

He reviewed his notes and decided against a long lecture. The visitors would not remember all the boring facts. No, he would tell them stories only he knew, such as the one about a ghost on Micou’s Island who gave people apples. Or the legends of pirate treasure hidden on one of the local islands. His hand went to the old coin he wore on a chain under his shirt. He had won it in a game of poker from an old lighthouse keeper who claimed he had found it after a storm. The piece of metal had been polished almost smooth by the sandpaper-like effect of the ocean, but in his black heart he knew it was a silver *gros tournois*: a coin minted under Philip IV, the scourge of the Knights Templar.

It was proof they had visited this bay, if only he knew precisely where.

Chester locked his secret into the sea chest of his mind and focused on the task at hand. Right. This was Peggy's maiden voyage, and it would have to make a lasting impression on the eager Japanese tourists so they would tell all their friends about it.

"For Peggy," he whispered and gave his nephew a signal to proceed. *Sea Dog* rocked gently, cupped by the sapphire depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

Joel was rather enjoying himself, glad to be on the open sea again. He piloted the white boat with ease and soon forgot about the silly costume that the wind plastered against his body. There was no way to shake the gulls, which soon discovered there were not going to be any snacks. They pelleted him with guano, either to express their disappointment or for target practice. The bonnet proved to be indispensable, its wide brim protecting him from the worst of the gulls' wrath. Their high-pitched shrieks were music to his ears, just as the sharp briny smell of the sea water bested any perfume. All was well in Joel's world.

He stopped the boat in Black Cove, with its deceptively serene dark waters, and while Chester was telling some made-up story about mermaids sunning themselves on sleek rocks, he took the soiled bonnet off and reached for a spare sailor's hat. Behind his back his uncle made a dramatic gesture.

"And Peggy woke up to the horrible sound of the mast breaking. In the middle of the blackest night, her ship was going down and all the passengers with it. Then a miracle happened ..."

Chester paused and eyed his nephew, who was standing dangerously close to the edge of the boat. There was a shove and then a plunge as Joel went overboard. Everybody stood up from their seats, shouting excitedly

and pointing at Peggy, who was madly struggling to resurface. Recording devices were produced to document this terrifying lifelike performance.

“You ... bastard ...” Joel managed to say while fighting for breath in the cold hell that was about to swallow him. The stupid nightgown was dragging him down, his feet entangling in thick seaweed. He was going to die like his father. He felt a surge of self-pity and anger. What was that madman Chester doing? Why was he not trying to save him?

Chester was checking his watch to see how much longer Joel could stay in the water. The thrashing of arms and kicking of legs were rather convincing. But his nephew could swim, and if need be, Chester would throw him a life ring.

Joel went under. All that his mind was registering now was the stabbing pain and numbing cold. It was too much even for him, who was used to the sharp points of tattoo needles. Was this what death felt like?

“Father!” he pleaded, but his voice came out in bubbles, distorted by the dark mass of sea water that had seared his lungs. He let go.

A pale shape bumped into him and pushed him to the surface. He was being dragged by something with teeth. *A shark? A dolphin?* Joel’s thoughts flowed at glacial speed.

Sea Dog was in danger of capsizing as everyone crowded on one side, clapping their hands and calling out praise for the brave poodle that had swum from the shore to save Joel’s life. The young man was lifted aboard and revived. Someone had removed the soaked nightgown and covered him with a scratchy wool blanket. The intrepid dog stood guard over Joel until the boat had returned to port. By then the video of

Peggy's drowning and transformation from a girl to a young man had gone viral on the Internet.

Chester was pleased with himself. He recognized the dog, which he thought belonged to the Reed boy. He and his parents would be somewhere nearby – on the shore or at the emporium waiting for the next boat tour. Chester rubbed his hands, eager to feel the crispy dollars that the gullible people were starting to throw at his enterprise. He ignored his nephew's murderous look. There would be trouble when Margaret found out what had happened, but even she would have to agree that the impromptu drowning performance was unique.

By the end of the summer he might have enough money to launch a diving expedition to locate the sunken Templar fleet. It would be the find of the century, and Chester already saw himself on the cover of various magazines, elbow deep in a chest of gold, smiling because he had beaten everyone else to the find.

CHAPTER 11

I WAS somewhat disturbed by Joel Seaboyer going overboard (which I had witnessed while walking Sir Lancelot on Black Cove beach), as was everyone else. The heroic dog was being lavished with praise and even earned me a free pass on *Sea Dog*. I tried to tell my parents that I had seen Chester shove his nephew into the frigid Atlantic Ocean, but they refused to believe it. According to them it was an unfortunate accident.

Adults often do not believe children even though they should. The mistake I made was to accept my parents' version of the truth.

We were in the last group of tourists about to discover the wonders of St. Margaret's Bay. Chester announced that Joel (a.k.a. Peggy) would not be joining us on account of his feeling indisposed. Sir Lancelot was keeping Joel company, so we went without him. With the wind whipping in our faces and the boat plowing its way through the green and blue waves, we quickly forgot the earlier incident.

Chester Seaboyer gave us the choice of exploring the history of local lighthouses or the less-known but true history of the pirates and wreckers of the Atlantic. Naturally, all hands were in favour of pirates and wreckers.

My mom checked the tourist guidebook and leafed through it back and forth. Then she asked, "Excuse me, but how do you know there were wreckers in this area?"

Chester Seaboyer nodded knowingly and seemed to relish the answer: "Seaboyers used to be ship wreckers in Indian Harbour before they moved to Talon Island."

A wave of murmurings rose among the group. Some people looked at Chester with worry, others with a hint of admiration.

"What is wrecking?" I asked.

"Well, before lighthouses were built to guide ships safely to harbour, sailors had to rely on maps and memory to navigate. On a treacherous coast such as this one, locals used lanterns to lure ships onto the rocks. When the vessels started to sink, the wreckers would steal their cargo."

A shocked silence descended on *Sea Dog*. My mother wrapped her arms around me as if to protect me from Chester, a descendant of Indian Harbour wreckers.

"Why did they do it?" came a question from a frowning tourist.

"To make a living," Chester explained, "when fishing or farming was not enough. Those were tough times."

"What about the lighthouse? When was it built?" my father asked and pointed at the small lighthouse on a rock jutting out of Talon Island.

"In the late 1800s. The first lighthouse keeper lived in it, and he also served as the Coast Guard, saving fishermen who fell off their boats. His annual salary was \$100, and he manned the lighthouse until it became electrified. Next stop: Shut In Island."

I sat up straight and did not take my eyes off the bay's largest island, which seemed to be made entirely of granite. It resembled a white fortress overgrown with shrubs and trees, looming above the glittering waters in a low bank of fog.

The treasure poem I had found inside the flask talked about an island rising from haze. I had made a copy of it and now pulled it out of my pocket.

*Under an oak tree, a chest of gold
Raven's story I once was told
Guarded by eagle's watchful gaze
[White?] cliffs rise from morning haze
Follow the sea serpent's hiss
The right time you must not miss
Take the oath or take [the?] gold
Choose ... and you shan't grow old*

There could be oaks on the island, but which one was the right one? Would it still be standing after 700 years? And what of eagles? If they lived on this island, they were not home today. We were being followed from the air by a disjointed flock of gulls.

"What's that noise?" a tourist asked and grinned as we heard something that resembled a fart with a hiss, followed by a spray of water. Chester suppressed a smile.

"That is a blowhole. There are some caves underneath Shut In Island, and one of them is inhabited by a giant lobster, Maggie. She must be 80 years old. I saw her once, when I was diving, and her claws were the size of my forearms."

"But no sea monsters?" my dad nudged me.

Of course ... The poem was not talking about sea monsters but the hissing sound coming out of a natural blowhole!

"Mr. Seaboyer," I waved at Chester to notice me, "is the blowhole exposed at low tide or is it always underwater?"

"Listen to this young man, everybody. He is going to be a diver someday."

“About my question?”

“I was only down there once, when I was looking for the wreck of *Advance*, an American ship that sank in 1923. The blowhole is a tight squeeze, but, yes, it’s above low tide.”

“Thank you.” I sat down and made some notes next to the poem. I underlined “sea serpent’s hiss” and “haze.” Now, if only I could find the oak tree and eagles ...

“Nicky,” Mom leaned over and pointed over the water. A bird with a wide wingspan was gliding above the waves, focused on a dark, sleek head that came up occasionally. An eagle on a hunt. The sea creature, perhaps a seal, did not resurface. I waited to see if the eagle would fly to its nest, which would hopefully be on Shut In Island, but instead the large bird followed the coast to the north, looking for more food.

Nevertheless, I felt satisfied that Shut In Island was the true location of the buried treasure, with an entrance via the blowhole. Was it enough to receive a blessing from the ghostly knight and a licence to dig? I squirmed in my seat and could not wait to share my new findings with Hugin and Munin.

Feeling happy made me feel hungry too, and I reached for a muesli bar in my pants pocket. As I was pulling it out, a gust of wind snatched the piece of paper I had placed there earlier. The poem!

“Stop the boat!” I yelled and tried to grab the neatly folded page that was spiralling away from me.

“Nicky, what’s going on?” Mom asked, distracting me momentarily, so I did not see where it landed.

“Um, I lost some notes. But it’s nothing irreplaceable.”

Chester looked our way, but Mom told him that everything was all right. The boat moved on. The rest of our tour was peaceful, and my parents shook Chester’s

hand when we disembarked. While Dad was asking him about diving, Mom and I went to collect Sir Lancelot.

He was sitting in the shade near the emporium, tied to an old lobster trap with a piece of rope.

“Uh-oh,” I said when I saw him.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asked and bent down to untie him. He wagged his tail and licked her hand.

“His collar is missing,” I pointed out.

“It must have slipped into the water when he was rescuing Joel Seaboyer. Don’t worry. You are not in trouble. I will explain everything to Vivian.”

“Maybe she could hire Chester to dive in Black Cove and retrieve the collar. It looked expensive,” I said with disdain.

“Who’s talking about diving?” said Dad, who had just caught up with us.

“Oh, we were discussing how to find the dog’s collar. It’s probably on the bottom of the ocean.” Mom pointed at Sir Lancelot, who was trotting beside us.

“And you thought Chester could do it? Well, he is thinking about taking divers out to sea on his boat and looking for sunken ships. He said there were quite a few shipwrecks near Shut In Island.”

That got me worried. I did not want people snooping around the island before I ascertained what was under it.

“Dad, what did you tell him? I hope nothing of importance.”

“I just asked him about his dives in the Florida Keys, where people look for sunken treasures. He says that right here, on Shut In Island, a local man from Hacketts Cove found some Spanish pottery from the 16th century.”

“Honey, that’s amazing,” Mom exclaimed.

What were Spaniards doing here in the 16th century? Had they, too, attempted to recover the Templar treasure? My thoughts spiralled back to Jean Baptiste de Saisi, whose ghost had been holding a vigil over these two islands for 700 years. No, the treasure lay untouched, and it was going to remain that way.

Had I started to think like the spectral knight? Or had the treasure found yet another mind to entice with promises of vast riches?

I hooked my arms around my parents' and focused on the ground beneath my feet. On this windblown and solitary coast you needed an anchor – something to keep you from going off course.

What about Jean Baptiste? All he had were his beliefs, his convictions and his oath to keep the secret safe. In all that time he had never swayed, never been forsworn, or he would not still be here.

Admiration for the lonely knight and a secret wish to be like him started budding in me. I resolved to do something for him, and I knew just what he might find interesting.

“Mom, can we go to that bakery again?” I asked casually.

“The Black Sails Bakery?”

I nodded vigorously. Our supply of sourdough needed replenishing, but this was not the only reason I wanted to go see the German baker.

“I’ll take you,” Dad offered, “when I go to Lunenburg tomorrow for another video shoot.”

That suited me perfectly. After we dropped off Sir Lancelot at Vivian’s house, I was free to do as I pleased. The ravens were nowhere to be seen, which was strange, but I realized they must have had their own private lives that did not revolve around solving medieval mysteries.

No, they were busy flying over this part of the world, spying for their god, Odin.

At home I made detailed notes about my observations regarding Shut In Island and the placement of the four boulders. I compared them to those found on Oak Island and pondered the existence of a fifth rock resembling a head or a skull that might still be in the ground here somewhere. I spent the rest of the day on my bed, surrounded by my trusted cats, reading a book about ghosts and ghost ships haunting the shores of Nova Scotia. The sightings seemed to be plentiful before the advent of technology, while now they were largely unnoticed, probably due to the fact that people were too busy believing what was on television. It was a sheer stroke of luck that Ralf Kaspar on the other side of the bay still cared about them and lit a candle for them.

On the following day we drove to Lunenburg, where I helped Dad with his video equipment. I was quiet and helpful and did not fidget at all, which he found very strange, but I assured him I was all right. Finally, on the way back, we stopped in Chester, where we pulled up in front of the Black Sails Bakery. The German had been busy. Since we spoke last he had acquired what appeared to be the stern of a ship, which was to be attached to his building.

“I want to open a tavern,” he said and made a grand gesture with his arm. “A non-alcoholic one, although I am not sure anyone will come.”

“You should organize a pirate festival,” Dad said.

“They already have one in Mahone Bay,” the baker replied. “Tough competition.”

“Mr. Casper ...” I started.

“Kaspar,” he corrected me.

“Mr. Kaspar,” I continued smoothly, “is *Young Teazer* the only ghost ship you have ever seen?”

He glanced around us to see if anyone else was listening and leaned forward conspiratorially.

“No,” he whispered, “I have a detailed map of all the ghost ships and their locations.”

“Where is it?” I asked.

He eyed me suspiciously, as if I was asking to see his work permit.

“Nicky is researching local history and folklore,” Dad stepped in.

“Pre-colonial,” I specified.

“I don’t know of any ghost ships like that,” the baker shook his head resolutely.

“This ship would be a nameless one and seen near Shut In Island.”

“Hmm ...”

He scratched the back of his hand. It had been shaved to prevent dough from sticking to the hairs, but they were already growing back. I had never shaved in my life, but Mom said she always itched after shaving her legs.

“Wait here; I have something,” he said and disappeared into the back of his store only to return with a dotted map.

“I mark every ghost ship I read about. The ones I have seen with my own two eyes have a red dot. This is *Young Teazer*, and this one,” he pointed at the area known as Prospect, “is the *SS Atlantic*.”

I noted a yellow dot on our side of the bay, hovering close to Shut In Island.

“How old is this one? Which century?” I stabbed the map with my index finger.

“I do not know. I only heard of her once. She is small, so that makes me think she must be very old. Modern ships were bigger and longer.”

Dad and I exchanged a look, and I had to bite my lower lip to suppress a victorious smile. Ralf Kaspar stashed his map away and pulled out three brown bottles from under the counter.

“A special recipe,” he said, giving each of us his latest root beer concoction, “for a special occasion.”

“Can Nicky drink that?” Dad asked, and his question made me straighten my back to make myself look taller.

“I put some mushrooms in it, so it should be okay.”

Dad was not so sure as he took my bottle away from me and said he would try it first, at home, when he was not driving.

“I will be going ghost ship hunting when it’s full moon,” the baker said, and it sounded like an invitation, which we declined politely. I, too, had a meeting with a ghost, although not on water. It was going to be an encounter I would have to undertake alone, with the exception of two ravens sitting on my shoulders whom I trusted to guide me back to the world of living if need be.

CHAPTER 12

TWILIGHT was falling on St. Margaret's Bay, subtly blurring the outlines of the rocky shore and the horizon. It was a time of half-light, when the world balanced between light and darkness. The moon was rising, pulling on the ocean with an invisible umbilical cord. A winged shadow swooshed by and circled over a standing stone. Hugin was early, which he noted with smug satisfaction. His brother was nowhere to be seen, no doubt stuffing himself with a last-minute snack to suppress nervousness. Finally, he came.

"Sorry I am late. Last-minute preparations."

"*What* are you wearing on your head, little brother?"

"Oh, this thing?" Munin cocked his head and managed a sheepish look. "It's a headlamp on a strap."

"I am not blind. But why are you wearing it?"

"Because I am afraid of the dark."

"Since when?" Hugin sounded incredulous.

"Since I got trapped in that dumpster when we were chicks."

The lamp started sliding down from Munin's forehead and onto his black beak, which snapped at it with instinctive precision.

"Here," Hugin said and hopped closer. "Let's put it around your neck."

Munin was so surprised by this unexpected show of kindness coming from his otherwise-standoffish brother that he did not notice something moving in the thicket behind the stone.

“When do you think Jean Baptiste is coming?” he asked conversationally, as if they were waiting for a pizza delivery and not the venerable guardian of the world’s most coveted treasure.

“I am already here,” came a calm reply.

The ravens’ heads snapped around, and their tails gave an involuntary twitch.

Jean Baptiste de Saisi was standing next to the tall stone as if he had been there for all eternity. He stepped out of the shadows and into the faint moonlight, letting his hood fall onto his shoulders. He looked deathly pale, Hugin and Munin noted with concern.

“My friends, speak to me. What news of the boy?” the knight asked and eyed both ravens.

“He found the stone cross, and he knows the sword lies over Shut In Island,” Hugin answered, giving the ghost a succinct report.

“He knows who you are,” added Munin, “even though we never gave him a hint about the Order.”

Jean Baptiste nodded to himself, and the ravens relaxed a fraction. He turned his face to the moon as one might turn to the sun for warmth and joy. But there was no warmth to be had from the nocturnal pilgrim, only cool luminescence, which brought the ghost into focus.

“What of his character? Can he be trusted with a great mission? Will his loyalty sway in the face of danger?”

“We have only known Nick Reed for a handful of days, but we have noted that he is respectful of his elders and kind to animals. He feeds us posh French bread. It’s \$5 a loaf. Handcrafted, with no chemical additives,” Munin answered.

“His uncle is a man of sword who can teach him combat techniques,” Hugin said, “although modern

warfare relies more on remote-controlled drones instead of man-to-man fighting.”

“You have good taste,” the knight turned to Munin and gave him a rare smile. Then he spoke to Hugin.

“I am hesitant to leave everything to a mere boy. Who can he call on when the hounds get the whiff of the treasure?”

“Us,” Hugin stated simply. “We can become *fostri*.”

“Foster brothers,” Munin the historian explained. “We will adopt Nick Reed into Clan Rune.”

Jean Baptiste nodded slowly. He liked the proposal but wished for the boy to have adult help until he came of age. *Twelve years was old enough to be a squire, but a knight?*

“We could put him to the test,” Hugin suggested. “It’s tradition.”

The ghost remained silent. Should he share his deepest fears with the two ravens? He thought he could hear the last grains of sand about to fall through in the proverbial hourglass.

“Time is running out,” he said grimly.

“Aw, do you have to go already?” Munin asked and opened his wings. The headlamp was getting heavier by the minute.

“No ... I am fading. I must find a new apprentice very soon.”

It was true. He was fading in and out of this world, like a flickering candle about to go out. Unless that flame were passed on to a new acolyte, it would die and with it all light. No, he had to try harder. He had to stay here longer – long enough to swear in a new recruit.

“We will perform the tests tomorrow and then bring the boy at sundown,” Hugin said, and Munin nodded,

which caused the lamp to slide off his neck and crash into a thorny bush below. "Oops."

A cloud moved in front of the moon, and for a little while darkness had the upper hand. When its shadow passed, Jean Baptiste was gone.

"Do you have to embarrass me every time?" Hugin lashed out at Munin, who was trying to retrieve his lamp. "We are envoys of Clan Rune, answering to the last enduring Knight Templar, not a pair of clowns."

Munin was not listening. He had finally grabbed the elastic strap and pulled the lamp out of the bushes. As it bounced against rock, a pair of eyes flashed in the dark. Munin yelped.

"What now? Did a mosquito bite you?" Hugin asked mockingly.

"I saw something with big eyes staring right at us! What if it's a wolf?"

"Don't be ridiculous. There are no wolves in Nova Scotia," Hugin said condescendingly, but he looked around just to be on the safe side.

"What if the province is reintroducing them into the wild?"

"That would be a disturbing thought. Let's go."

The two ravens took off hastily and hurried home, which lay in the thick forest behind Seal Cove. They did not like flying in the dark, even with the headlamp, which had been deployed as prevention against avian collisions.

When their loud squawks had grown distant, a yellow cat stepped out of the thicket and sniffed the air with his scarred nose. The tattered ends of his ears and the pearly white surface of one eye made him look more like a pirate than a wolf. The ravens would be back, and then they would have a chat.

CHAPTER 13

I LAY on my belly under the gazebo with my legs sticking out, the skin on my knees scraped by the rough granite. Toby the cat was assisting me with the removal of lichens and moss from the spot I believed was the centre of the cross over Talon Island. I was sure I would find a *cross pattée* carved into the surface of the rocky hill ...

“What’s he doing?” a voice rasped from a swaying pine tree.

“Re-enacting *The Wizard of Oz*,” another voice answered, “the scene where a farmhouse drops on the evil witch’s head.”

Ouch! I banged my head on the bottom of the wooden structure and scared Toby, who raked my scalp with her claws in an attempt to get out. You would think she would be kinder to the hand that feeds her, but the fight-or-flight instinct was too strong to resist and she had given in to it wholeheartedly. I would have to go home and dab my head with rubbing alcohol.

Slowly, I backed out, crawling on all fours and scraping my elbows as well in the process. Lots of rubbing alcohol. The ravens tut-tutted when they saw me.

“Hi, guys! I was just checking under the gazebo to see if there is a carving of the Templar cross,” I said cheerfully, ignoring all the scrapes.

“There isn’t,” Hugin observed dryly.

“Just dotting all the i’s and crossing all the t’s. So, when and where do I meet the ghost? On Shut In Island ... where he can show me around?”

The ravens looked at each other, and Munin cleared his throat.

“Actually, we have a favour to ask you,” he said slyly.

“What’s going on?” I asked, suddenly wary.

“An enemy of our clan has been injured ...” Munin continued.

“... and we cannot be seen helping it,” Hugin finished. “We wondered if you could assist us.”

Intrigued, I followed the ravens all the way to the wooden bridge by the beach. Toby came too, and soon enough the other cats emerged from the bushes and trailed behind me. Fortunately there was no traffic on the narrow road or someone could have been squished.

“Over there, by the beach rocks,” Hugin screeched.

A rather large gull was walking on the wet sand, its right wing hanging down limply. It would require a closer examination by a veterinarian, but my guess was that the wing was broken. For a gull this was a catastrophe. The bird would starve to death within days. My heart went out to the poor wretch ... and to the two ravens who had shown great compassion for their adversary.

“Okay, I think that gull needs to go to a veterinary hospital. I am going to get a cat carrier and try to trap it. Can you talk to the bird and tell it that everything will be all right?”

Munin addressed the white gull with a series of sharp squawks. But instead of sitting down to wait for a medical transport, the patient sprinted off and plunged into the water, paddling away hastily.

I waded in to go after it, but its yellow webbed feet were faster than mine. What was that daft bird thinking?

I turned to look at the ravens, who had watched the attempted rescue with polite interest.

"I do not think I can catch the gull. I am sorry. I botched it," I said, shrugging my shoulders. Toby was getting upset now, running up and down on the shore and meowing. I got out of the cold water and was bending down to pet her when I saw an object wedged between a piece of driftwood and a rock. It was a small waterproof case with a zipper.

"What's that?" Hugin asked curiously. Munin fluttered down and hopped closer to me to take a look for himself.

"A wallet," I replied and took out an ID card. "Takada Fumio. It must belong to one of the Asian tourists who came to the emporium."

"Is there any money in there?" asked Munin, craning his neck.

There was about \$500 in small banknotes as well as several credit cards. A small fortune for someone like me, who derived income from a paper route. When I looked up, seven pairs of animal eyes were fixed on me, anticipating my next move.

"I have to return this wallet to Mr. Takada. What a disaster to be on vacation and lose all your money."

"Why don't you keep it?" Hugin leaned forward.

"No one would know, and we won't tell," tempted Munin.

"That is bad karma," I wagged my finger at him. "Besides, what will Mr. Takada think of Canada if he gets robbed as soon as he steps off his tour bus? No, I have not been raised to be a thief."

The ravens shifted uneasily, and a quick, guilty glance passed between them. They were up to something, I

could tell. I looked down at the wallet and wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible.

"I have to deal with this find. Please watch for that gull in case it comes back. That wing needs looking after."

"But we are not finished yet," Munin protested. "There's another ..."

"I know," I cut him off, "but we can meet again before it gets dark. I do not think the ghost operates in the daytime."

"Then let us reconvene at the gazebo just before dusk," Hugin suggested. "We have some errands to attend to."

And so it was that our paths parted once again ... although for much longer than any of us could have anticipated at the time.

First, I took the cats home and told my parents about the gull and the wallet. They were proud of me for doing the right thing, but their opinions as to what to do next clashed.

"I think we should call the RCMP," Dad said, but Mom shook her head.

"Mr. Takada is on Prince Edward Island by now. Let's call the Seaboyers. Margaret probably knows how to contact that bus driver who demolished her sign."

Mom wasted no time and got on the phone. After she hung up, she came to me and said: "Margaret Seaboyer already knows about the wallet, so we can take it to her. She asked if we were missing a cat."

I was surprised to hear this because I had just returned from the beach with our entire feline tribe.

"All our cats are accounted for," I said confidently. Mom sighed. People often tried to place a stray animal

with us, thinking that it would just get lost among the many we were already feeding.

"Nicky, would you mind going to the emporium to see which cat she is talking about? I think the Seaboyers are dog people ..."

"We can try to find it a new home," Dad suggested. "There might be some old lady on the island who could use a companion."

The face of Ariel de la Mer floated into my mind. Hadn't she said something about having cats in the near future? This might be the perfect fit.

I got up and prepared my stray-cat kit: a flea comb, antibiotic ointment, claw clippers, a fluffy ball with a bell in it, a small blanket and a bag of treats. I stuffed it all in a cat carrier and told my parents I would try to drop off the cat at Ariel's. I liked being on a mission and did not mind this unexpected diversion. Plenty of time till dark – plenty.

On my way to Seaboyers' Emporium I almost broke into a song, feeling happy and carefree under the summer sky. Even the ancient diving suit with its giant brass helmet seemed to gleam merrily, and I said hello to the aquatic doorman as I passed him by.

Mrs. Seaboyer was inside, arranging dusty bottles on what was now an *Al Capone Rum* shelf. She must have sold all the *Titanic* items to the tourists since my last visit. She was whistling a fast tune under her breath. There were curlers in her hair, and she had painted her nails red. Was she in love?

"Um, hello," I addressed her broad back, clutching the handle of the cat carrier with both my hands.

"Ah, the Reed boy. Brought the wallet, have you?" Mrs. Seaboyer smiled at me.

The lost item was handed over and got stowed under the counter, hopefully only temporarily.

"Where's the cat?" I asked and looked around the cluttered shop.

"Follow me. The cat is in the donation box," she said.

We went outside and around the corner, where a large wooden box had been added onto the building. "As soon as the news spread that we were accepting donations, people started dumping their junk here. What I really wanted was antiques, not cats." Mrs. Seaboyer lifted the lid, and we peeked inside. A round, fuzzy face with matted orange and yellow hair turned to squint at us. It was none other than the old tomcat that had bitten my dad on the night of the big storm.

"I will take him," I said without hesitation and let the cat sniff my hands before they closed around him. Then, very slowly, I grabbed the tom by the scruff of his neck and lifted him out of the box. He was as mellow as a kitten being transported by its mommy to safety. Mrs. Seaboyer waited until I had stuffed him inside the carrier and then went back to her work. I thought my next stop would be Ariel's house, but fate had a different plan for me.

As soon as the doors of the emporium slammed shut, Chester came striding down the dirt road, kicking up dust. His right hand was bandaged, and he was in a foul mood.

"Boy, you had better come and get your dog or I will call the pound."

"I don't have a dog," I protested.

"Tell that to your grandmother. The mad poodle bit me. I told you before that he should be on a leash."

Oh boy.

“Where is Sir Lancelot now?” I asked, looking around and not seeing the troublemaker in question.

“I locked him in the lighthouse. He is a public menace. Come with me. I will show you the way.”

Why did everyone think all the animals on the island were my responsibility? I felt flattered that grown-ups and even ravens trusted me with rescues, but why was it happening all on the same day? First the gull, then the cat and now the dog. An angry dog too. I suspected I knew why Sir Lancelot had sunk his teeth into the hand of Chester Seaboyer. It was payback for Joel.

“I have a cat with me,” I pointed out and lifted the cat carrier for Chester to see. Cat and dog would not mix well.

“It’s in a box, behind bars, so it should not be a problem. Let’s go.”

I sighed and looked back at the road leading to my summer home. The sky was growing pale over the island, and I had a feeling we were in for a bit of rain. The weather could change rather quickly in these parts. I set foot onto the overgrown path leading to the lighthouse. I had to go and find Sir Lancelot before his luck changed too.

When we got there, I could hear hoarse barks echoing inside. How long had Sir Lancelot been there? And what had he been thinking, running away from Miss Maelstrom like that? Chester stood aside and motioned graciously for me to pass and get in front of him.

Dear readers, if a strange man asks you to help him find a puppy, do not follow him into the bushes. It is the oldest trick in the book ...

Chester’s left arm struck like a snake, hugging me to him, his hand clasp my mouth shut. I made an unintelligible sound that never left my throat on account

of a length of cold steel being pressed against my carotid artery. The cat carrier dropped from my sweaty hand and landed with a thud.

“Do I have your attention now, kiddo?” Chester breathed heavily into my ear.

I could not nod or say yes, which was a tricky situation to be in. Fortunately, the madman interpreted my silence as acquiescence.

“I can tell when people lie to me, and if you do, I will cut your throat and chuck you in Davy Jones’s locker. The current is strong here – your mommy will never find you.”

“Hmmpf,” I managed to say.

Chester must have realized I could not talk without getting my throat cut, so he gave me a little breathing room.

“What is Davy Jones’s locker?” I gasped.

“It’s pirate lingo. It means you’ll die.”

The knife came within a hair’s breadth of my artery again. I prayed my bladder would not embarrass me. It almost did when the next question came.

“Where is the treasure?”

My fluttering heart took a deep plunge.

The treasure?

The treasure!

“What?” I croaked, knowing full well what he was talking about. How on earth had he found out about it?

“I warned you not to lie. Where is the treasure?” Chester repeated, chopping the words so there would be no misunderstanding. A whiff of garlic odour engulfed me, making me want to gag. The man must have had a whole bunch of it for breakfast – probably while he was reading the poem I had lost aboard *Sea Dog*. It was all my fault!

“Are you talking about the verses I left behind on your boat? I found them in the old trunk from the emporium ...” my voice broke and trailed off.

Chester Seaboyer cursed, and I could imagine why. The beaten-up trunk that only looked fit to keep kindling in, sold to a boy from away for a measly \$10, holding a great secret ... It could have been his had he searched it thoroughly before putting it in the store’s inventory.

“It’s on Shut In Island, isn’t it? I read your notes,” he said hotly.

“Then why are we here? Why aren’t you on Shut In digging up the world’s next Money Pit?” I yelled in anger and frustration.

I expected a blow to my head for that infraction, but Chester still possessed a shred of sanity, which was growing thinner by the minute.

“If I knew where to dig, I would not be asking you, you little twit,” he hissed.

The trouble was I did not know where to dig either. That knowledge lay with the dead knight, Jean Baptiste de Saisi, whose face would haunt me forever if I betrayed him to a stinky pirate. But was I willing to die for the Templar’s secrets? I, who had only lived 12 years, whereas he had seen seven centuries pass him by? There had to be another way out of this.

“What makes you think there even is a real pirate treasure?” I asked, testing the waters.

“Because of a local legend, which this poem confirms,” Chester said stubbornly.

I was relieved Chester Seaboyer was only looking for a pirate treasure and that the word Templar had not come up in our terse conversation.

“Shall I kill the dog first?” he asked casually and pushed me toward the lighthouse where Sir Lancelot had gone quiet, probably expecting to be released any moment now.

“No!” I protested. “The dog is innocent! I will tell you everything!”

A fleeting shadow on the side of the lighthouse told me something with two sharp eyes and deft wings had passed over our heads. I chose that moment to speak so that my last words would not be lost on the wind.

“I am all ears,” Chester said smoothly and let me go. I clutched at my throat and spun around to face him. He was in a half-crouch, holding a diving knife, his eyes a pair of gimlets, his teeth bared in a sneer. I gulped and steadied my voice.

“The poem was just the beginning ... On a stormy night I had an encounter with a ghost. If you want to know more, you must speak to him directly.”

“You are joking, right?” Chester’s eyebrows rose.

“No sir. I am dead serious.”

“Hmm, I smell a rat, but there is a grain of truth in your story. It is said that pirates sacrificed human life, leaving the soul of the victim to guard the treasure until their return.”

“Then this is what you have to do: Speak to the ghost in the scrying mirror. It’s currently in the woodshed behind our house.”

“I will. And you, my friend, will stay here until I come back. If you lied to me, expect no mercy.”

He motioned for me to get inside the lighthouse, where I was greeted by a drooling and ecstatic Sir Lancelot, who was willing to put up with the cat too, as long as he had my company. I had bought us some time, but I had no way of knowing how long that might be.

Still, there was a chance I could get us out of this prison, and that made me feel good.

A chain rattled outside, and there was the click of a padlock. I would have to seek another exit, maybe the small window way up high.

I heard Chester's boots crunch on the gravel as he circled the lighthouse, making sure he had not missed something. He was getting ready to leave. I rushed to the door and pounded on it with my fists.

"Wait! I forgot to tell you something!" I yelled.

Chester stopped and waited. I was certainly under no obligation to help him, but I did not want any blood on my hands, be it animal or human – even if that human was an aspiring criminal descended from a line of wreckers. Life was life, unique and precious, and it was not ours to destroy.

"It is very important that you do *not* do what the ghost says," I warned him.

The boots resumed their walk, and soon we were alone, in a dim and stuffy lighthouse, too far away for anyone to hear us. The adrenalin had run its course inside my veins and gave way to fatigue. I sat down with my back against the wall, my mind tired and completely blank.

Suddenly a wave of panic rose in my stomach, and I leaned forward to retch. Sir Lancelot's cold nose pressed into my cheek, bringing me back to my senses. I put my arms around him gratefully and had to smile when he started licking my face. The dog believed in me, and that belief prevented me from sliding into a pit of despair.

Right. What we needed was more light. I got up and ran my hand over the rough wall near the door. There should be a light switch somewhere ... Bingo.

Next I needed to distract myself with something familiar. I checked the poodle for any cuts, but he was as fit as a fiddle. He performed a quick search of my pockets, and I had no choice but to give him some of the cat treats. While he was busy crunching and smacking, I opened the cat carrier and let the old tomcat out. Then I clipped his claws and applied some ointment to his infected scratches. Clearly, no one had taken care of this poor feline pilgrim. I promised myself I would find him a good home. He must have heard my thoughts because he started to purr up a storm. Curiously, thunder rolled in the distance, growing louder and closer, as if it wanted to make our acquaintance.

It could have been much worse. We could have been tied to a tree in the scraggly pine forest or resting inside Davy Jones's locker. Instead we were in a quaint lighthouse on Talon Island, only a short distance away from my parents and the police.

If only I could alert them to my situation and whereabouts ... I looked up and studied the lantern room.

The lighthouse mechanism ... I would attempt to hack it and send a distress signal. Surely someone would notice a flashing SOS.

CHAPTER 14

It was pitch-black outside. The wind was whipping the trees whose branches slapped and scraped against the single-pane window in the attic of Seaboyers' Emporium. A fat candle was burning on the windowsill, its flame glowing steadily, unperturbed by the storm's fury.

Opposite from the window an oval mirror had been set up to reflect the white and purple lightning that flashed in the sky. Chester Seaboyer had done his best to recreate the atmosphere described by Nick Reed in the hopes of invoking a restless spirit guarding a treasure.

Now he stood in front of the mirror in deep concentration, unsure what he should do next. The boy had not said anything about a spell or incantation to activate the mirror. Chester repeated the poem he had found on his boat, enunciating every word in a clear voice.

The sound of something scratching the framed glass made him jump. He looked into the dark void of a hooded face on the other side. He was being scrutinized, sized up. Chester relaxed. This was no worse than facing an eel with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth that almost attacked him many years ago during a dive in the Florida Keys. Keep breathing, he reminded himself.

"A true seeker," the voice came as a whisper from a cold crypt.

Chester felt encouraged by that. No doubt the ghost had dismissed the boy as too young for such serious things. Should he say something?

“I seek the treasure.”

The hooded one studied him for a moment and then waved one long sleeve. The image of Shut In Island appeared in the mirror. Chester’s eyes went wide. Then the image disappeared and was replaced with that of an underground tunnel leading to a spacious cave. There, above the water level, was a roughly hewn stone staircase. Chester wanted to see more. Where was the gleaming gold, where were the gemstones? His hand touched the silver coin hanging from his neck.

“Silver ... Lose it!” the hood commanded.

As if in a trance, Chester took the chain off and let it drop to the floor. Who cared about a dull, notched coin of suspicious origins? The dark one in the mirror seemed to approve of this and rewarded him with a glimpse of a glowing pile of gold coins, strings of pearls, royal crowns and rough gems the size of a man’s fist.

Not a single facial tic betrayed the eruption of glee inside Chester’s heart.

“Are you worthy?” the ghost challenged him and grew more ominous against the night full of large stars in the mirror’s background.

“I am! I am ready,” Chester hurried with his answer, anxious to go diving under Shut In Island. It did not matter that it was dark and rainy outside; he had all the equipment he needed. Wait ... there was no trace of a storm inside the mirror. Was it a trick? The Reed boy had said something ... a warning Chester could not recall at this very moment. The mysterious guardian ghost had sensed Chester’s seed of doubt and squashed it quickly.

“Step inside the mirror.”

“Why don’t you step out instead?” Chester tried to be clever.

The temperature in the uninsulated attic dropped significantly. A wisp of milky fog snaked out of the mirror, reaching for Chester, who took an instinctive step back.

“Give me your hand.”

Now was not the time to chicken out. This was a chance of a lifetime. The whole world would hear about Chester Seaboyer’s fantastic discovery. The financial aspect of it was not to be frowned upon either. Putting every shred of doubt out of his mind, he stepped closer to the mirror and reached out with both his arms. The eerie mist enshrouded his unresisting body, and darkness poured inside his eager mind.

Where there had once been a man and a ghost, now there stood only one.

CHAPTER 15

I WAITED and waited for Chester Seaboyer to return, but night had fallen and we were still locked inside the lighthouse. My attempts to send an SOS signal had resulted in a complete shutdown of the light, which was bound to attract the attention of the Coast Guard. When I finally heard someone's shoes crunch on the gravel outside, I tensed, and so did the poodle next to me. Was it Chester, back to complete his dastardly deed? The chain rattled, and the door shook violently, but it did not budge.

"Nicky! Are you in there?" my dad shouted.

His voice had an electrifying effect on me. I jumped up and rushed to the door, willing it to open.

"Dad! Yes, I am in here. I have Sir Lancelot and the stray cat too."

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice a mixture of worry and relief.

"Yes," I assured him, "we are unharmed. How did you know I was in the lighthouse?"

"We received an anonymous tip. Your mother stayed behind in case the police called. But how did you get stuck here?"

"It was a trap set by Chester Seaboyer. He thought I knew where the pirate treasure was."

"Is he nuts?"

"He seemed quite convinced the treasure was real. I was trying to tell him I knew nothing, but I made up a story to make him go away."

“Smart boy. Now let’s get you out of here. If only I had a pair of bolt cutters ... Oh, hello.”

Another person had arrived on the rescue scene, and I heard a muffled dialogue through the weathered door. The dog was standing next to me, alert, tail wagging, but the absence of growling and barking reassured me it was not Chester Seaboyer.

“Nicky,” Dad said into the crack in the door, “the Coast Guard’s technician is here. He is going to cut through the chain. Hold the dog, please.”

It only took a few seconds for the bolt cutters to snap the chain into pieces; then the two men heaved on the door, which opened with a creak and a groan. Two figures stood with flashlights, one of them my dad, who rushed forward to give me a bear hug. I peeked over his shoulder and saw a slight older man with a bald head that glistened in the soft rain.

“Hi, I’m Brian,” he said modestly. “Did you do this?”

“Yes and I am terribly sorry,” I said. “I wanted to send an SOS signal.”

“Ah. Do you even know what the signal is?”

“... --- ...”

“I’m impressed. Most people these days have no idea what Morse code is.”

“I read about it somewhere,” I said offhandedly.

“Imagine that ... he reads books too,” Brian turned to my dad in mock surprise.

Dad ruffled the hair on top of my head and motioned for me to get ready to leave.

“My son told me a local man by the name of Chester Seaboyer locked him in here and planned to return. He could be dangerous.”

“Noted. I will radio the Coast Guard and get the RCMP after him too.”

Dad shook Brian's hand and helped me gather the animals. It was a silent walk down the narrow path, which had turned muddy in the rain. The night was damp but not completely dark as a string of orange lights shone above the rugged shoreline where Indian Harbour was. I wondered if the ghost of Jean Baptiste de Saisi had ever noticed them and what he thought about the encroachment of civilization on his territory.

I stopped dead in my tracks and smacked myself on the forehead. The ghost! I was supposed to meet with him and the ravens tonight.

As if Dad had heard my thoughts, he turned to me and urged me to hurry. We passed by the emporium, which was completely dark and lifeless. Timidly I looked up at the small window in the attic where Chester lived, but there was no sign of his presence. Perhaps he was diving under Shut In Island and counting the Templar gold to which I had led him so foolishly.

We crossed the wooden bridge that separated the Seaboyers' land from the rest of the island, and from there it was only a stone's throw to our rental house. My mom let out a shrill shriek of joy when she saw me, and once again I was hugged and squeezed and cuddled. I let her get me out of my wet clothes and bundle me up in three blankets on the couch. The cats thundered down the stairs to see me and the two newcomers, and for a while it was a total zoo until all the animals were made busy eating in the utility room.

Blissfully, I sank into the blankets and sipped hot tea while my parents called the police to let them know I had been found as well as the identity of my abductor.

Then it was time to confess. My parents listened intently as I described the trap set by Chester Seaboyer, and they were outraged when I mentioned the knife.

“He is going to rot in jail for this,” Dad’s eyes flashed with anger. “To think we were on his boat just recently!”

“It’s probably my fault. It was my poem that he found,” I said in a small voice.

“Oh, honey, it’s nobody’s fault,” Mom said soothingly. “Chester is a grown man who should know better than to believe in treasure stories.”

“What if it’s real?” I asked.

“Listen, young man,” Mom bristled, “you put that nonsense out of your head. There is no such thing as treasure on Talon Island ... or Oak Island, as countless men would testify. Why aren’t you interested in normal things like ... like ...”

“Violent video games? Mindless banter in Internet chat rooms?” I hazarded a guess.

“Are you sassing me?”

“Um, no. I think ... I think I am just tired,” I said and rubbed my eyes. I never heard Mom’s reply because all the fatigue had caught up with me and I slumped against the cushions, falling asleep in an instant.

My mother laid me down gently and tucked the blankets around me. Later on I was told that my cats had kept guard over me for the remainder of the night; they had even let the old yellow cat and Sir Lancelot sleep by the fire.

When I woke up, the house was quiet, with everyone still snoozing peacefully. The sky was paling, which meant dawn was on its way. I was about to roll over and go back to sleep when a sharp peck on the windowpane scattered my sweet dreams.

Peck, peck, peck ...

Wake up, wake up, wake up ...

It was a raven, either Hugin or Munin, I could not tell which, come to remind me of an audience I had almost missed.

I tossed the blankets aside and hurriedly looked for my shoes and a jacket. I let myself out the back door so as to not wake my parents. The ravens were waiting for me, perched on a small ornamental tree in the backyard. When they saw me, they took off without a word, flying ahead in the direction of the gazebo.

The grass was wet after last night's rain, as were the flat rocks on top of the small hill. I climbed with care so as to not slip in the mud, groping in the dark, which seemed to be full of thorn bushes and brambles. I could have brought a flashlight, but I did not want to attract the attention of unsavoury characters such as the Seaboyers.

When I reached the gazebo, Hugin was balancing on top of its roof while his brother sat in a pine tree.

"I am sorry I am late," I panted. "I was stuck in the lighthouse last night."

"We know," Hugin rasped. "The eagle told us."

"The eagle?" I was surprised.

"Yes," Munin confirmed. "He saw two people and a dog, and we came to the conclusion it must have been you who did not come out of the lighthouse."

"Unfortunately it took us a long time to find a pay phone," Hugin explained. "They are few and far between these days."

"That is so nice ..." my voice trailed off as I imagined the two ravens frantically looking for a public phone to call my parents to apprise them of my whereabouts. They were true friends, and I wished I could repay their kindness somehow. Not for the first time did it occur to

me that in a world of greed and malice animals seemed to be the more noble species.

What was I doing pursuing this mythical treasure, involving innocent creatures in the search and putting myself and them at risk? And what of my obvious naïveté, my delusion that I could guard an ancient secret when I could not even guard a little poem? I turned on my heel to leave, and that was when I saw him.

“Nick Reed.”

The ghost of Jean Baptiste de Saisi hovered just a few feet away from me. He lowered his hood, and we studied each other’s face for one long moment. He had intelligent, piercing eyes, a long nose and high cheekbones framed by dark wavy hair. The length of his beard and moustache made me acutely aware of the fact that my own face was as smooth as a baby’s.

“Mr. de Saisi ...” I bowed deeply and resisted the urge to wring my hands nervously.

“You are late.”

“I was detained. A local man named Chester Seaboyer found out about the treasure. I apologize for this, because it was my carelessness that led him to it.”

Jean Baptiste’s eyes narrowed, and his head turned slightly in the direction of Shut In Island as if he were tuning into it. Then his gaze fixed on mine.

“The treasure is safe. No one has been to the cave,” he assured me.

I exhaled in relief. Either Chester had not gone to Shut In Island yet or he had failed to find the entrance.

“How much does this man Chester know?” the spectral knight asked me.

“He has the poem I found in the old trunk. I told him he needed to talk to a ghost, and I referred him to the scrying mirror. A last-minute improvisation.”

“You sent him to the dark side?”

“To Dartmouth?” I wondered out loud.

Behind me the ravens snickered and then tried to cover up their laughter by coughing hastily.

“Dartmouth, the other part of Halifax, also known as the dark side,” I explained. “But, no, I did not send Chester into darkness. I specifically told him not to do what the ghost in the mirror asked.”

Hugin and Munin made appreciative noises. They held tricks and ruses in high esteem. The ghost turned his face to the two winged brothers and then asked them a strange question.

“Did the candidate pass all the tests?”

“He did,” Hugin screeched, and Munin nodded enthusiastically. Not comprehending, I looked from one raven to the other.

“He has compassion. He did his best to rescue an uncooperative gull.”

“He is honest. He insisted on returning a stolen wallet to a tourist from halfway around the world.”

Now I understood ... The strange behaviour exhibited by the ravens the day before had been a series of tests of my character. I should have known they were up to something.

“He is brave and has cunning,” the knight said quietly. “But will he take the oath?”

My feet must have sprouted roots because I could not move. I clenched and unclenched my fists to get my blood circulating. My heart was beating a loud *yes* even as my mind was a whirlwind of questions, objections and self-doubt. I was a mere boy whereas Jean Baptiste was a knight, a trained warrior. How could I ever replace him? How could I ever walk in his steps and do what he had done?

I would never find out unless I tried.

“I will,” I said firmly.

Jean Baptiste untied his cloak and let it drop to his feet, where it pooled like grey mist. Underneath he was dressed in a white surcoat over a white tunic. Over his heart was a red *cross pattée*, the cross of the Knights Templar. It was rather small, unlike the ostentatious crosses in historical dramas, but all the more believable.

“The oath you will take is simple. It is the oath that all of my brothers took – the oath of poverty, chastity and obedience.”

When the message finally arrived in my brain, I almost laughed. I, who was about to be the new guardian of the fabled treasure from the Paris Temple, could never own it, sell it or profit from it. It was an ingenious design. I held my tongue and looked over my shoulder at Shut In Island, saying goodbye to the gold. Then I took the oath.

“Kneel,” Jean Baptiste commanded.

The rock under my knees was as hard as it gets, a fine piece of Nova Scotia granite. But I barely registered it as I focused on the sword that had appeared in the ghostly knight’s hand. Its edge shone as if it had absorbed the faint light of the dawn approaching over the horizon. We did not have much time. I closed my eyes.

I felt an impossible tap of the sword on my right shoulder followed by another tap on my left shoulder. All the while, Jean Baptiste spoke these solemn words:

“In the name of the Ordre du Temple, I, Jean Baptiste de Saisi, knight thee. We are brothers now.”

In the pine tree, Munin sobbed quietly, and even Hugin had to clear his throat as he looked on. I opened my eyes and stood up, feeling different somehow,

marked for life by the bluish blade that slid back into its sheath with a hiss. Jean Baptiste took a step closer to me.

“Put your hands over mine,” he said.

The touch was ever so light, like the brush of a down feather, a tingling sensation that spread from my fingertips to the crown of my head. The knight looked into my eyes as he shared the memories of his previous existence with me. A series of rapidly changing images flooded my mind. Among other things, I saw a young man who, too, had once felt he did not belong, until he found his calling. The last memory was that of a perilous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to find a safe place for a collection of scrolls.

“Scrolls?” I asked on behalf of mankind who held a firm belief that the Templars had spirited away a ton of gold.

A smile of pure mischief spread across Jean Baptiste’s face, and he gestured for me to put my hands over his again. The memory reel restarted, and I was made to understand that the Templars had a large collection of scrolls dating back to an ancient civilization of Atlanteans that had perished in the great flood. For a long time they were housed in the library of Alexandria and then transferred to Rome, where they were safe until the rise of the Inquisition. It was time to give the precious cache to someone trustworthy, someone like the Knights Templar. The transfer was arranged by the pope himself, a curious twist that shed a new light on the medieval church.

Jean Baptiste had read some of the scrolls, which contained star maps, advanced science, sacred architecture and secrets of the soul.

“Can I read them too?” I asked, but he shook his head. The scrolls had to remain hidden until such time as mankind was ready to know its own true history.

“Is there any gold?” I could not help bringing up the hot question that everybody had been asking since 1307.

The knight chuckled and withdrew his hands.

“Yes, we brought gold and silver here too – and artifacts found under the Temple Mount. You would like the shalimar, an ancient tool for cutting through rock,” he said.

“So that’s how you tunnelled under the island ...” I was sure my dad would want to hear about this shalimar, but then I realized I could probably never share my newly gained knowledge with him.

“Being the guardian means being alone,” Jean Baptiste caught the thread of my thoughts.

“He is not alone,” Munin chirped. “He has us.”

“They hear everything,” I apologized for the ravens, “but they are good friends. I could not do this without them.”

There was one more thing to do. I had received so much; I wanted to give something back.

“There is something you may want to know,” I started, “something I found out from a man who pursues ghost ships. I believe the ship you have been waiting for all this time is still here.”

“*La Templiere?*” Jean Baptiste’s eyes went wide. “But how ...?”

I never heard the rest of his question because at that moment the sun vaulted itself over the horizon and the world flooded with a tide of golden light that washed away all nightly shadows, including the white-clad ghost. Once again he had disappeared on me.

“Will I see him again?” I turned to the ravens.

Unable to contain themselves any longer, they flew down and hopped closer to me.

“Sir Nicolas, may we have a word?” asked Munin.

“I am no sir. Just call me Nicky as usual.”

“Very well, Sir Nicky,” Munin pressed on. “About our payment ...”

“What payment?” I asked, confused.

“For our clan’s services during the past seven centuries,” Hugin explained. “It has always been a pact between men and ravens. The clan has never been paid except in food and stories.”

“Which might have worked well in the pre-consumer era, but now we find ourselves in need of some funds,” Munin finished.

I could not imagine why ravens would need money and what they wanted to buy with it, but I did not see why they could not share some of the treasure they had helped guard all this time, provided that Jean Baptiste approved of their remuneration.

“Why don’t you work up a total and I will put in a good word for you the next time I speak with my boss.”

“Much obliged, sir,” Munin tried to curtsy, and Hugin bowed. I could not tell if they were joking or if they were serious. But I had not missed the latest twist in the story, which lay in the plural “men.”

“Hugin, what did you mean by ‘a pact between men and ravens?’”

CHAPTER 16

I MUST have fallen asleep as soon as I hit the couch because I had not even taken my shoes off. My mom was standing over me when I woke up at noon. She had a disapproving look on her face.

“Nicky, how could you sneak out like that, knowing Chester Seaboyer is still at large?”

“I am sorry, Mom. I woke up just before dawn and remembered my meeting with the ravens. I went to the gazebo, where I was knighted by a 14th-century ghost, thus becoming the new guardian of ancient scrolls from Atlantis.”

It was the truth, but its outlandishness guaranteed an outright dismissal by any sane adult, which was exactly what I was counting on.

Mom folded her arms across her chest and tapped her right foot, a sure sign of igniting irritation. She narrowed her eyes and wagged her finger at me.

“I will chalk this up to your delicate emotional state after last night’s trauma. But as of now, and until further notice, you are grounded, young man.”

“Mom!” I wailed. “I have to go outside.”

“Why? To get yourself kidnapped again, or worse?”

“No. I have to ... ” I looked around desperately and clutched my crumpled blanket. How could I explain to her that I needed to relive and discuss all the details of my knighting with Hugin and Munin? They would be out there, in the pine forest, waiting to apprise me of the staggering sum of money owed to them since 1307.

Something brushed against my foot. I looked down and saw the old yellow cat squinting at me with his one good eye. He, too, appeared to be eager to leave the premises and get some fresh island air.

"I have to find a home for this old cat. That artist, Ariel de la Mer, said she wanted a cat. But if you want to keep him ..."

Mom shook her head vigorously to indicate that the five cats we already had was the limit and any newcomer could only stay with us temporarily. As if on cue, Dad stomped into the room. He was wearing a pair of tall rubber boots with reinforced toes, a prudent precautionary measure after his previous encounter with the yellow cat.

"Hey, skipper, you got a present," Dad said and produced a platter of cookies.

"Compliments of Mrs. Seaboyer," he winked at me, "along with another free ocean tour."

"Aw," Mom put her hand over her heart, "Margaret must feel really bad about what happened."

"She stopped by to say that if Chester shows his face in the emporium again, he will be looking down a gun barrel," Dad said dramatically.

"Seaboyer justice," Mom nodded. "They take care of their own."

I accepted a cookie and bit into it tentatively. I hoped Mrs. Seaboyer was a better shot than she was a baker. While I did not wish for any more violence, something told me Chester Seaboyer would be back, and there was no telling as to his mental state.

With utmost inconspicuousness I hid the rest of the cookie under my blanket. It was definitely raven food – or gull food.

"I am feeling much better now," I chirped. "Can I groom the cat and take him to Ariel's?" I blinked innocently.

"You may," Mom conceded, "but one of us will come with you. No more monkey business!"

She wagged her finger at me again and left the room, leaving me alone with Dad.

"So, where do you want to go on your next boat tour?" he asked and almost broke a tooth on a Seaboyer cookie. "Wow, these are hard. They must be special combat pastry. Like morning stars but the Nova Scotia kind."

I chuckled and produced my half-eaten specimen. Dad tossed it on top of the others and set the platter aside.

"Shut In Island," I answered his question without hesitation.

"To do what? Hiking ... camping?"

"Something like that. Maybe Joel could drop us off there and pick us up the next day?"

"I don't see why not. It's public land, so we should be able to camp there. Who knows, maybe there are some anatomically shaped rocks there."

"What do you mean?" I frowned.

"You know, like that rock on Oak Island that was shaped like a skull. Or was it a human head?"

A wide grin spread across my face, and my mood picked up considerably. Dad knew exactly why I wanted to explore Shut In Island, and he was game.

"Did I tell you my great-grandfather's brother went to the Klondike during the gold rush?"

"No, you never told me that. When did this happen?"

"It would have been in the late 1890s. The two brothers were immigrants from Croatia, and when they

came to the United States, they split up. One ended up working in a coal mine in Utah while the other went to Yukon. He was in trouble with the law, so he just kept on going.”

“Did he find any gold?”

“No one knows. The Reed family never heard from him again. It was a dangerous place to be, the Klondike, with dreadfully cold weather, harsh living conditions and half-crazed men preying on each other.”

“Are you saying we have treasure-hunting genes in our DNA?”

“Perhaps. But I want you to know that you already are rich and fortunate. No amount of gold will ever replace or outweigh the value of our family. I just want you to remember that in case we come across a rock shaped like a skull on Shut In Island.”

“I will. I love you, Dad,” I said and slid off the couch to give him a hug. The yellow cat was observing us with open curiosity, as if we made a fascinating study in human behaviour. He thumped his tail against the wooden floor and squinted his good eye.

“Sometimes I think that cat knows what we are talking about,” Dad said but made no attempt to rub the unpredictable tom behind his ears.

I knew for a fact that animals understood English, but I suspected my parents would dismiss my claims that I was friends with two multilingual ravens. It was safer to keep it in the realm of curious possibility, legend or fantasy.

“A penny for your thoughts, lad,” Dad said.

“Um, I was just thinking about the supernatural. Dad, do ghosts really exist?”

“I think so ...” he replied with some hesitation. “But perhaps it depends on a person’s religion. Some people

believe there is a soul that animates our body and that after the body dies, the soul goes on.”

“Where does it go?”

“Again, that depends on one’s beliefs. In some religions you get reincarnated; in others you only live once. But many people who have had near-death experiences have come back talking about the tunnel of light.”

“What’s the tunnel of light?” I felt a row of goosebumps spring up on my forearms.

“Well, while you are unconscious, your soul sees a tunnel of light and follows it. Usually there is someone waiting at the other end, to turn you away.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not your time yet. You have to return to your body and move on with your life.”

“And who is this person that waits for you?”

“A deceased relative – someone who knows you and cares about you. That is why it is important to make friends while you are alive, so that you have allies on the other side.” He punched me on the shoulder, half-mockingly, half-seriously.

It was all rather creepy and difficult to imagine in broad daylight, but the nature of this strange process resonated with me. Perhaps if this tunnel of light could be activated and made to appear for Jean Baptiste de Saisi, he could actually go home, where all souls went after their business was finished on earth. I made up my mind to bring up the subject the next time I saw him.

“Get off me,” Dad said, trying to shake the yellow cat, who was rubbing against his tall boots. It was time to end idle talk and get to work. I had a home to find for this furry rascal, and the only way it was going to happen was if he was presentable.

To my astonishment, and in complete defiance of all known cat laws, the old tom did not protest when I gave him a bath, brushed his matted coat and applied various ointments to his sores. He rather enjoyed all the attention and pampering. My cats watched us incredulously, retreating into far corners of the house in case they were next.

I assumed Mom must have called ahead, because Ariel was already waiting for us at the end of her driveway. She had an impassive look on her face as she accepted the delivery of one tomcat.

"What's his name?" she asked and peered inside the cat carrier.

As far as I knew he had no name, but given the circumstances of his first appearance on our doorstep, I felt he would not care for a cute name such as Mr. Fluffy.

"Wanderer," Mom said and looked at me for approval. I nodded silently. It was a perfect name.

"He certainly looks like one," Ariel agreed and led the way to her tiny house.

To our surprise she was not alone. Vivian Maelstrom was sitting in a deck chair, her long slim legs crossed and her foot wagging rhythmically.

"Um, hello, Miss Maelstrom. How is Sir Lancelot?" I asked, looking around for the intrepid poodle in vain.

"After your father dropped him off this morning, I thought he would sleep all day, but no. He is aboard *Sea Dog*, working as the new mascot of the Seaboyers' enterprise. I think I will sell him, but I have to find out how much he is worth."

I winced internally. The selling of animals was not something I condoned. Still, it was good news that Sir Lancelot had a chance of living a life he could be

passionate about, even if it meant staying on the less-prestigious side of Talon Island.

"Don't tell me you wished for a cat," Vivian turned to Ariel, who smiled mysteriously as she set the cat down.

"Maybe I did," came the reply. I could tell I was missing the meaning of their conversation, as was often the case when I heard women talk. I ambled over to look at a canvas on an easel in the grass, curious to see what visions were taking shape under Ariel's paintbrush and wanting to give the women privacy.

It was another moon (that much was obvious), with a dark side and a light side. I noted with some satisfaction that the light side resembled my mother's profile while the dark side was that of Vivian Maelstrom. I shot a hasty glance in her direction, wondering if she was aware of her depiction. If she was, she did not care to show it, now completely absorbed in a conversation with the artist and my mom. Here and there, snippets of some hilarious secret reached my ears.

"... a couch," I heard, "an actual couch, washed up on the beach."

"What did you wish for, furniture?" Ariel asked in a puzzled voice.

"No. Why would I do that? I specified romance," Vivian Maelstrom insisted. The women giggled. I was pretty sure this was not something for my young ears, so I went to check on the yellow cat instead. He had been released from the cat carrier and was sitting on the doorstep of the small house. Unable to quell my curiosity, I stepped inside and took stock of the interior.

There was only one bedroom, a tiny kitchen and an even tinier bathroom. Every available space was crammed with portfolios and canvasses. Invariably, my attention was drawn to the most valuable objects

hanging on the wall: an old drum and a shaker made out of a turtle shell. My hand longed to touch them, but they were not mine.

“You can hear them too, can’t you?”

Slightly startled, I withdrew my hand and turned around. Ariel was standing in the doorway, framed by light streaming in from outside. For a split second I thought another person was with her, an old man hunched by age and secrets. I blinked. There was no one there except the two of us.

“The drum and the shaker belonged to my grandfather. He left them to me, along with this house. I was supposed to return to Montreal, but here I am, two years later, learning to be ...”

“A shaman?” I asked bluntly, emboldened by a sudden flash of intuition as to who Ariel really was.

She regarded me for a moment and then nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes, everything that my mother did not want me to be and tried to prevent me from being. Well, it did not work. Here I am, the last of the Ravens, with no one left to teach me the old ways.”

“Excuse me, what did you say?” I narrowed my eyes.

“Well, I am the last of my line. No siblings, no cousins,” she explained.

“You called yourself a raven.”

“Ah. My last name is de la Mer, but my grandfather’s surname was Raven.”

Now I understood why the little poem talked about *Raven’s story* and why Munin had protested against the insinuation that his clan had let the secret of the great treasure out. Someone else had known about Jean Baptiste’s dealings in this area – someone who had agreed to carry the message for him. *A pact between men*

and ravens, indeed. Perhaps now that pact could include a woman as well. It was the 21st century, after all.

"Ariel, did your family live on Talon Island in the 1920s or 1930s?" I asked. I needed to make sure I was not imagining things or jumping to conclusions.

"Funny you should ask that, but, yes, they did. My great-grandfather was a native fisherman who built the first house on this island. It still stands – the small white one with green trim that's just around the bend in the road. His name was James, but everyone called him Jimmy, Jimmy Raven. He was also the first rescuer in Indian Harbour, along with the lighthouse keeper."

"Was he a bootlegger by any chance?"

"No," she shook her head, "he never touched alcohol. But the same cannot be said about the lighthouse keeper, who supplied the entire area with illegal spirits."

"What was his name, do you know?"

"Hmm, I think it would have been Amos Seaboyer. You can ask Margaret. I bet some of her antiques used to belong to him," she winked at me.

I nodded slowly, another piece of the puzzle falling into place. Perhaps James Raven had been friends with Amos Seaboyer, who had managed to pry the secret out of him only to bury it at the bottom of his bootlegging trunk. Why? Had the L'nu warned him about the potentially lethal nature of the Templar treasure? He must have because no Seaboyer would willingly keep his hands off something so valuable.

"Come, we can talk more on the way to the beach. There is a waterlogged couch Vivian wants me to inspect."

"For fleas?" I hazarded a guess.

"No, for magical properties," Ariel said with an air of mystery.

Magic was not my forte, but the beach lay on our way home, so I said goodbye to the old yellow cat, who was fast asleep on Ariel's bed, his paws sticking up in the air, vibrating gently. As I passed the drum, I could swear that it, too, was vibrating. I hurried to join the three women, not wishing to meet yet another ghost of the long-lost past.

CHAPTER 17

It was hot and stuffy in the attic of Seaboyers' Emporium. Chester opened the single-pane window to let some fresh air in. The sharp, tangy breeze seemed to soothe his splitting headache. With slow circular motions, he massaged his temples until the throbbing subsided.

Now why was the right side of his neck so sore? Where was that mirror? Chester stepped in front of the silvery oval to take a look. Was that a tattoo? His fingers traced the wicked black snake swallowing its own tail. He tried in vain to remember the snake's name.

"Ouroboros," a slithery voice hissed.

Startled and confused, Chester shot a sweeping glance around the attic, which was completely empty save for himself. He turned back to the mirror and yelped. The face staring back at him was his own, but the eyes ... The eyes were a pair of bottomless pools of cold dread.

"No!"

Chester got up and stepped back, crashing into the stool, which fell over with a thud. He clawed at his head and face, but he could not shake off the darkness that had descended on him like a falling parachute. *Do not do what the ghost asks.* Someone had said that to him, but who? Why could he not remember anything? He kicked the stool across the room in anger and frustration.

"Who's up there?" a voice bellowed downstairs. Margaret ... Chester had never been so glad to hear his

sister-in-law's voice. He was about to run to the hatch when the floor exploded in a shower of splinters. Down below, Margaret Seaboyer was reloading her gun.

"You devil!" she was shouting. "How dare you show your face here after what you did to that little boy?"

He froze. Had she gone crazy? What was she talking about? Chester raked his brain for hot coals of any recent catastrophic events, but there were only cold ashes of uncertainty. He had not done anything to any boy. Margaret must have had too much of the old bootlegged rum she had dug up behind the old homestead.

Then came the distant wail of a police siren. She had called the RCMP on him! Chester knew when he had worn out his welcome. He reached for a duffle bag lying on his bed. It was so heavy ... What was in it, bricks? He unzipped it and stared at several pounds of jewellery, including expensive watches. There was a handgun too – one he had never seen before. Shaking with terror, he zipped the bag up and backed away from the bed. Something was wrong, horribly wrong.

The only sensible explanation was that he was being framed, but by whom? Margaret? Joel? Probably both of them. He had no doubt they were trying to oust him from the business now that it was showing signs of success. But who cared about their stupid little gift shop with fake antiques, or that lame boat tour, when there was a pirate treasure to be unearthed.

Yes! The treasure was the reason why he had come here, to get his diving gear and to borrow the family boat. Now would be the perfect time to do that ... As quick as greased lightning he climbed down the fire escape and snuck off into the night. He could navigate *Sea Dog* even in the dark, just by starlight. He doubted the RCMP would pursue him on water, and by the time the Coast

Guard was alerted, he would be blowing bubbles under Shut In Island. If he could make it inside the blowhole, he would be safe from everyone, including ghosts. It was common knowledge that ghosts could not cross water.

A soft chuckle came from the vicinity of his left ear, but he chose to ignore it.

Once he was aboard *Sea Dog*, Chester breathed a sigh of relief and felt all the stress and headache of the past two days drop away. The only freedom any Seaboyer had ever known was at sea. The boat sputtered around Talon Island, keeping out of the glare of the small lighthouse. It reminded him of something – something he was supposed to do but had forgotten. Oh well, it would come back to him eventually. Now he needed to focus on the dark sea, which rocked the boat gently, passing *Sea Dog* from wave to wave under the Northern Cross.

He turned the boat lights on just as he came near Shut In Island. He had to find the blowhole, which was now silent but would soon start moaning like a tormented soul with the turn of the tide. After some fussing, he anchored the boat and got himself ready to dive. This would be an exploratory mission, he told himself – one to ascertain the existence of the alleged treasure. If the Reed boy had lied, though, well, there would be hell to pay.

Nicky Reed's face popped up in Chester's mind like a jack-in-the-box, along with Margaret's accusation that he had done something bad to the young boy. Probably self-inflicted wounds, maybe at Margaret's suggestion, laying all the blame on Chester. Yes, they were in it together, the Reeds and the Seaboys, conspiring to put him in jail so they could rob him of his treasure. He cursed them all and plunged into the cold Atlantic.

There were some interesting stories circulating in St. Margaret's Bay about Shut In Island. A pair of iron rings had been supposedly driven into its rock, for tying ships to, but no one could remember their location. Shards of Spanish pottery had been found there too, suggesting the Spaniards used to stop in Nova Scotia before sailing back to Europe in colonial times. And there were the odd tales about strange lights dancing among the trees on the island at night, as well as the wailing of the ghost of a hanged man that could be heard during storms. Chester did not pay them much heed, mostly because all such sightings were usually superstitions from an era before electricity.

It was curious that none of those stories had ever mentioned a large undersea cave, making him believe it was completely secret. He knew of cavelike shelf formations that extended over the sea bottom, but they were not suitable for the long-term storage of precious items. Moreover, there were remnants of multiple shipwrecks that had occurred here in the past, littering the island's perimeter and creating a perfect habitat for sea creatures. There had been this American ship loaded with Rolls-Royces, and Chester wondered if Maggie the giant lobster had moved into one of the sunken automobiles during the Roaring Twenties, growing huge and dangerous with the passage of time, just like his sister-in-law. Margaret, Maggie, Peggy ... They were all bad for his health.

The eerie shapes of swaying seaweeds parted like a curtain swept aside by an invisible hand, and a sudden change in the ocean current told him the blowhole was nearby.

Chester approached the gaping, jagged entrance into the hitherto-unexplored depths of Shut In Island with

some trepidation. It was going to be a tight squeeze, but if he dropped the air tank, he could get in. He reminded himself that pirates had not had the advantage of modern diving gear, and yet they had managed to penetrate the island and stash their gold there. If they could succeed, so could he, but there was no need to be suicidal about it. Chester raised himself high enough to shine his flashlight into the hole and saw that it widened a few feet ahead. Good, that meant he could drag in the air tank after him.

The last thing he remembered was wriggling out of his vest and heaving the air tank into the blowhole.

Then he blacked out.

When he came to again, he was sitting on a hard wet ledge with his back against a smooth rock wall. He was holding his head in his hands, wincing as blood pounded in his veins, making his stomach sick. He must have been there for a while because his diving suit was dry, as was his mouth. He wetted his lips with his tongue and touched his limbs gingerly to check for any bruises. There were none. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the surrounding darkness and his ears registered the tap, tap, tap of water dripping from a high ceiling and splattering onto a metal surface.

Chester could barely make it out, but he was convinced he saw a neat row of boxlike shapes farther down by the wall. With great care, so as to not upset his stomach, he stood up and walked with his arms outstretched like a sleepwalker. When his foot connected with a solid oblong object, he stopped and bent down to feel the surface.

Coins. Were they gold? He picked one up and bit into it tentatively. It would need further inspection and

analysis, preferably in daylight, but his heart was already dancing a jig. He had found the treasure!

As the tradition requires, Chester grabbed handfuls of gold coins and tossed them high in the air, showering himself with the riches he so justly deserved. To think he had grown up with Shut In Island in his backyard, fantasizing about shipwrecks and sunken treasures, and now all those dreams had come true! He, Chester Seaboyer, was now richer than anybody he knew, and he would share none of it with any of the losers in the Bay, especially his family.

“Hahahahaaaa,” he laughed maniacally, “it’s all mine!”

“*Mine*,” the darkness echoed, and something in it stirred.

There was a sudden flutter of wings, and a leathery shape screeched by his face. Chester flailed at the little creature with his hands. It was only a bat, which meant there must be a hole in the ceiling somewhere. He would find it later. Now he had the great pleasure of counting the chests made out of oak wood, hardened into iron by old age, and estimating the amount of gold they held.

Some time later he came across his air tank and vest with weights, which he had discarded by the entrance. Or so he had thought.

There was no entrance now.

How was that possible? He distinctly did not remember walking through stone walls, which meant he must have walked through a door. Maybe it was not a door but a sliding panel like in medieval castles or ancient temples. Steady now, he told himself, inhaling deeply. He ran his fingers over every crack in the rock wall in an attempt to locate a doorway.

Maybe he had it all wrong. Maybe the entrance was in a different wall. He walked the length of the cavernous room again and gave a high-pitched squeal when he stepped on something long and crunchy.

"Bloody hell! It's a skeleton!" he exclaimed as a round object rolled off into the corner. That would have been the skull. Chester dared not touch what he believed were the remains of a pirate, or a victim of pirates, or, he gulped, another treasure seeker. Instead he backed away as quickly as he could, remembering his flashlight, which had to be here ... only it was not. Sitting down next to his air tank and rummaging in his vest's pockets, Chester felt completely exhausted. Sleep ...

He woke up hours later to what he thought were human voices, and he turned to them full of hope and apprehension at the same time. Had he been discovered? Maybe Joel had found the boat, or the authorities had caught up with him ... There was only one way to find out. Walking stealthily along the treasure chests, he made wary progress toward a shaft of light descending from the high ceiling above. The voices spoke again, rasping and grating in his ears.

"We've hit the jackpot here, Hugin."

"Call me Hugh."

"Then I am Monroe."

"What were you about to say, Monroe?"

"Seven hundred years of accrued salary, with compound interest. Sir Nick is just and generous. Do you think we will have to pay income tax on it?"

"No. That's only for humans."

"So what are you going to buy, Hugh?"

"Me? An electronic book reader, for starters. What about you?"

“A giant pizza,” said the one who called himself Monroe dreamily, “and the other side of the island. We could turn it into a raven sanctuary.”

Chester thought he heard the clacking of a beak, which was rather confusing. Who was up there? Someone who trained birds? He cleared his throat and called out. The voices went silent in an instant.

“Hello? Is anyone up there? Can you hear me?” Chester shouted in earnest.

“You don’t have to yell,” said a screechy voice. “Did you have a good nap?”

“Who are you?” Chester asked. “Show yourself to me!”

“We are figments of your imagination,” Hugh answered and Monroe snickered. Chester knew they were lying, but he could not climb up and bash their heads together. *Punks*.

“Whoever you are, you are not getting any of my gold!” he yelled and shook his fist. “Over my dead body!”

“Suits us fine. We’ll come back after you have expired.”

The voices went on talking and bickering over the international market prices of gold and eventually stopped altogether. Chester decided they had truly been just a figment of his overwrought imagination. He could use some peace and quiet. Now that there was more light in the cavern, he decided to count the oak chests once more and calculate the cubic feet of treasure he would have to transport all by himself. Then he remembered he had not yet located the passage between the underground vault and the blowhole.

“Oh, shoot.”

He was trapped under Shut In Island with not a single soul on the surface of the earth knowing his whereabouts. Except for Hugh and Monroe.

“Help! Help! Come back!” he shouted as loudly as he could, running and stumbling to the shaft of light, which was serenely silent. He looked up and wondered at the shape in which the rock had been cut by expert hands. It was a cross with arms of the same length, narrowing toward the centre.

“Templar?” he muttered and touched his chest, where his old lucky pendant used to be. Only it was there no more.

CHAPTER 18

THE next day the whole island was abuzz with the news of Chester's crime spree. No one seemed to understand what had made him do it. Why would a professional diver, normally as cool as a cucumber, turn to robbing gas stations and jewellery stores? But the part that really puzzled Margaret Seaboyer was the discovery of the scrying mirror in the emporium's attic. She recognized it at once and phoned us to ask if we would like to take it back.

My mom declined tactfully, saying the mirror was too large and we could not transport it back to Saskatchewan. Margaret, who was desperate to maintain a positive public image, offered us a store credit, which was graciously accepted.

I was deep in thought as we strolled down to the emporium to acquire more Seaboyer antiques. I could not help but notice the conspicuous absence of *Sea Dog*, which could only mean that after testing his robbing skills, Chester had sailed to Shut In Island in the middle of the night. Had the dark entity spurred him on? Was it still inside the mirror or at large with Chester?

"I want to get a couple of those beautiful glass fishing floats," Mom said as we entered the emporium. It was busy like a beehive inside, compliments of Doug Moraesh, who had delivered another busload of tourists on Margaret's doorstep. She was pouring him a cup of coffee and persuading him to have a cookie.

While Mom was deciding between a yellow float and a blue one, my dad pulled me aside and pointed at a spot in the ceiling through which light was shining. I was certain that the charred, gaping hole had not been there before. It looked as though the wood had suffered a small explosion.

"A gunshot fired at close range," Dad observed and moved under it for a closer inspection. A couple of tourists gravitated toward him, faces upturned, fingers pointing.

"Eh, what you see is evidence of ruthless rum-runners' turf wars, from the Prohibition era," Margaret said loudly and drifted in our direction.

"But it was not there before," I said stubbornly.

"Sure it was. See how the edges are black? It's from gunpowder and old age."

I turned to Dad, who shook his head, indicating I should remain silent. It was clear that Joel must have taken a blowtorch to the wood, quickly incorporating the latest family tragedy into the tapestry of the Seaboyers' colourful, even if made up, history.

"Fascinating," said a tourist and took a picture of it.

"Um, Mrs. Seaboyer?" I asked and tugged at her sleeve. She arched her eyebrows and glowered at me, but I had no intention of exposing her small fraud to her customers.

"My parents are going to Peggy's Cove tonight to watch the lunar eclipse, but I want to see it from our gazebo. Would you be willing to be my babysitter?"

"Oh ..." she was taken aback, "I suppose I could, but aren't you afraid of us Seaboyers?"

"Mrs. Seaboyer," Dad stepped in, "you are the last person Chester would want to come near should he return. We trust you in this matter more than anyone."

Margaret blushed and gave my dad a modest smile. Then they shook hands. I tried not to appear too happy about the prospect of being alone at the gazebo tonight in case my parents saw through my scheme and put an end to it. It was not my intention to deceive the grown-ups, but technically I was still grounded and I had to devise a way to be alone with the ghost for the last time.

He is fading, the ravens had informed me. Jean Baptiste de Saisi was readying for his final departure, and I had to help him find his way home.

Mom reappeared, holding two delicate glass floats, each suspended in a piece of fishing net. She had just opened her mouth to say something when the door burst open and Joel stuck his head in.

"Mom! *Sea Dog* is back!"

Everyone poured outside to witness the budding drama. I was expecting a pirate attack at the least, but all I saw was a strange boat towing *Sea Dog* to the mooring. Wasting no time, Joel had jumped into a dinghy and was now rowing furiously.

"Who is that?" everyone wanted to know.

"Angus MacPhee," said Margaret through clenched teeth, "our competitor."

"Can Angus keep the boat if he found her?" I turned to my dad.

He stroked his chin and said: "I am not sure what the local maritime law says. But remember this, skipper: If you are in a situation where your boat needs help, do not accept the rope thrown to you by another vessel."

"Why?"

"It's an ancient law of the ocean – you would be surrendering your boat to the other party."

I doubted I would ever face such a problem, but it was a good rule to remember anyway, along with not

speaking to the crew of a ghost ship. In the distance, the burly man named Angus MacPhee was talking animatedly to Joel, who seemed to be considering some kind of proposal. In the end the two men shook hands. Next to us, Margaret was fuming quietly, clearly not liking the fact that she had been left out of the discussion. Her anger subsided a bit when Angus waved at us and then steered away, leaving *Sea Dog* behind. We clustered around Joel as soon as he returned to shore.

"I have good news and bad news," he announced. "The good news is the boat is undamaged. Angus found her adrift. He said she must have dragged her anchor, but it is hard to tell where from."

"And the bad news?" his mother asked anxiously.

"Uncle Chester is missing at sea."

Margaret's hand flew to her mouth, and she choked back a loud sob. Despite the recent disgrace, Chester was family and like his brother Nelson, he, too, had found his end in the chilly embrace of the Atlantic.

Or had he?

While my parents were expressing their sympathy to Margaret, I approached Joel and casually asked him if Chester's diving gear was missing as well.

"Smart question," Joel nodded, "because the gear is gone. I would not put it past my uncle to have staged a boating accident to shake off the cops. But something must have happened to him or the boat would not have floated halfway across the bay like that. Even he can't swim that far."

Indeed ... unless Chester was not swimming at all but diving under Shut In Island. But how did he plan to get back to the mainland without a boat? Perhaps Joel was right. Something bad had happened to Chester, which meant I did not have to worry about him anymore.

“Ahem,” Margaret cleared her throat after she had recovered her composure. “What does Angus want for the towing?”

“A bottle of Al Capone’s rum,” Joel grinned and winced as his mother slapped him on his back, “and a share of the profits from our boat tours. He wants to join forces with us.”

“I cannot decide if the man is helping us or robbing us,” Margaret shook her head.

“Maybe he fancies you,” Joel said and deftly sidestepped to avoid a shove that would have sent him flying off the dock and straight into the foaming waters below.

The last two Seaboyers were playfully back at each other’s throats, a sign of recovery from the recent emotional shock. My parents seemed to think so too, because they said nothing about disqualifying Margaret as my babysitter.

She came at precisely 8:30 p.m. that night, dressed in a jogging suit and carrying a plate of scones. My parents showed her around the house and instructed her not to let me watch television past 9 o’clock. Then they gave me a hug and left for Peggy’s Cove on a romantic date in the waning moonlight.

Margaret found her favourite television channel, which, curiously enough, featured European soccer, and fell asleep, thus saving me the trouble of persuading her to let me go out alone. I covered her with a blanket and made a quiet exit via the back door, the cats trailing behind me like five silent shadows.

We trod quietly through the night gilded by lights twinkling along the shores of St. Margaret’s Bay. Above our heads clouds raced across the sky as if they did not want to be there when strange things happened to the

moon. It was going to be a once-in-hundreds-of-years event that combined a total eclipse of the moon with a peculiar planetary alignment. I wondered if that was the cause of Jean Baptiste's fading and if it would pass once the eclipse had ended. Had he felt the effects of the winter solstice, when our sun approached the Dark Rift, a cloudy area of the Milky Way, aligning Earth with the black hole in the centre of our galaxy?

If the heavenly bodies have a physical effect on the living, they must have an impact on souls too. Where did a soul go after its earthly travails were over? Would it make us less afraid if we knew?

"Should we tell him?" a raspy voice inquired from the protective cover of pine boughs.

"Tell me what?" I interjected and looked around to see who else was on top of the small hill. It sounded like Hugin and Munin were conspiring about something behind my back.

Two shapes, darker than the surrounding night, shot out from the trees and scrambled to sit on the door of the gazebo.

"A matter of minor significance, best left to natural selection with no interference from us," Hugin said smoothly.

"Hmm," was all I could say on account of having not the slightest inkling what the ravens were talking about. Probably another enemy of their clan.

The wind was picking up, this time dragging fog inland from the open sea. Hurry, I thought, hurry before we cannot see a thing. My hands were starting to feel cold, so I put them in the pockets of my fleece vest.

"Scones, anyone?" I said and produced a couple of tough scones made with equally tough love by Margaret Seaboyer.

“I’ll have one, please,” Munin croaked and deftly caught a piece of pastry with his beak.

“Blech,” he almost gagged, “that German baker is losing his touch.”

“Um, how about I save these for the gulls?” I retracted the unfortunate scone and stuffed it back into my pocket. Then I looked at Hugin, who sat motionless against the monochromatic backdrop of the moonlit bay.

“Where is Jean Baptiste?” I asked him.

The raven seemed to listen to a message whispered to him by the wind, which also carried the lugubrious sounds of the foghorn and the clanging of the bell out on the open sea.

“He is out there, making his last rounds.”

CHAPTER 19

THE full moon was casting its silvery light over the liquid darkness of the waters below. The ocean hummed to itself, and the waves were in no rush to reach the shore. The wind was preoccupied with fluffing up the clouds and arranging them in the sky like pillows.

The Luna was about to slide into total eclipse, to the awe of many people who, being in the 21st century, knew it was a shadow play and not a portent.

Jean Baptiste de Saisi, a 14th-century ghost, was observing the unfolding of the major celestial event with some unease. He, too, understood that the moon would be overshadowed by Earth and disappear temporarily. It was one of the many things that intrigued him, just like the red dots that pulsed quickly across the sky.

The ravens had told him it was an airplane, a metal machine shaped like a bird, designed to carry people in its hollow belly over long distances. Such wonders surrounded him, inventions he would never see, let alone try out. How the world had changed around him ... He was a relic and, what was worse, felt like one too.

He had been here too long, not by his own volition but by a strange twist of fate. It was Yngvi who had found him shivering on this very spot, in the shadow of a big boulder, gazing at the winter seas.

"You are dead," the raven had told him.

"But I am standing right here, talking to you."

"Then where is your breath?" Yngvi had cocked his sleek head and blown a small cloud of air out of his beak.

Life is a habit that is difficult to shake, and so it had taken several experiments, such as passing his arm through rock or walking through a tree, before Jean Baptiste had finally accepted that he was a ghost. There was an invisible barrier, a definitive limit, that set him apart from the world of the living, akin to being behind a glass wall. He could observe and hear, but he could not touch.

Once, he had passed his hand through Yngvi, who had shaken like a leaf in a gale and said it was too creepy.

Then there was telekinesis, the ability to move solid objects with the power of his will and emotion. He had started off slowly, with snowflakes and bird feathers, his efforts culminating when he had knocked down a brass ornament from a mantelpiece. He had honed his haunting skills until he could flip light switches, and one time he had even managed to turn on a gas stove, upsetting the tenants of that particular house.

But it was really the long conversations with the members of Clan Raven that had kept him alert and sharp. They had taught him Old Norse in exchange for French, Latin and some English. They liked to report to him everything they had seen or learned, like a network of personal spies. He had been intrigued by their runic writing, just as he had admired the Egyptian-like symbols of the L'nuk.

He had been fortunate and blessed, in life and in death, in friends and in his successor. He bowed his head over his hands resting on the pommel of the pale sword. There was a rush of wind that flattened grass and ruffled heath, inviting the fog in. Jean Baptiste rose from his seat and sheathed his sword. He lifted his eyes and saw that a sliver was missing from the moon, which had turned orange. The time was nigh.

He walked briskly down the coast and then took a shortcut through the forest. He could feel eyes in the dark watching his progress. Owl. Raccoon. Cat. The last one was following him, its one good eye gleaming in the night. He did not break his stride, pausing only once he had reached the south side of the small hill. In the pine growth was a spot he wished to see one last time, a cross he wished to place his hand over.

Farewell.

Jean Baptiste climbed the path to the gazebo without looking back. Ahead of him was a small assembly of cats, ravens and a young boy, the outlines of their bodies glowing with the hues of life force. They ranged from the white of purity and innocence to the indigo and purple of the higher mind. They were the colours of light, invisible when put together – a light no darkness could put out, a light that was eternal.

He felt a tug at his cloak and looked down to see what looked like an old yellow cat with tattered ears.

“You are right – I don’t need it anymore,” Jean Baptiste said and shed his woollen cloak. “It’s yours if you want it.”

The cat looked puzzled but did not follow him as he took his last steps to the circle of stones and the gazebo.

“Jean Baptiste!” Nicky exclaimed as soon as he saw him. Behind the boy the ravens were poised on the wooden door of the gazebo, gripping it with their claws. Hugin gave the ghost a solemn bow while Munin stared with his usual mixture of awe and slight horror, awe gaining the upper hand at the moment.

“You are not wearing your cloak tonight,” Nicky noted and took a step back to give him a once-over.

“I come as myself,” Jean Baptiste smiled under his moustache. “There is no need for a disguise anymore.”

“What if someone sees you?” Nicky declared with concern.

“Have no fear,” the ghost shook his head. “I would be more worried if they saw what I am about to show you now. Give me your hands.”

The ravens and the cats watched with fascination as something akin to mist poured from the knight toward Nicky, forming an image floating in the space between them. There was Shut In Island and on it a large rock wedged in a granite cleft. A rock with no marks – the entrance to a maze of booby-trapped tunnels and caverns beneath.

“The gold is in the antechamber,” Jean Baptiste explained, “to satisfy any man’s greed and to blind him so that he will look no farther.”

“I am going to give some of it to the ravens,” Nicky said.

The knight’s brow furrowed, and he looked at the ravens, who gave a synchronized twitch, but he said nothing. When he turned to Nicky, he saw the boy was on the verge of crying.

“What if I cannot do this, what if I cannot be like you?” Nicky said pleadingly.

“Remember who you are. Remember the oath. You are a link in a long chain of guardians, a chain that cannot be broken unless you break faith. Do you understand?”

A nod, then another. Silent hot tears streaming down more than one face.

“Will I ever see you again?” the boy’s voice quavered.

“I do not know. All I know is that I must go. I was supposed to go to heaven when I died, but, alas, I woke up on this island again.”

“Then this must be heaven,” Nicky smiled through his tears. He wiped his face with a sleeve and looked up at

the remaining sliver of the moon. Soon it would plunge the island into darkness, only to recover its fullness, like the end of a cosmic tunnel, shining bright.

“The tunnel of light!” the boy exclaimed, electrified, all sadness gone. “That’s it! Jean Baptiste, you must walk into the tunnel of the moon’s light. Promise me you will!”

“I will try.”

Nicky accepted this with a silent nod. He knew what preyed on the knight’s mind: the ghost ship that might or might not be the much-awaited *La Templierie*.

Quickly, he stepped forward to embrace Jean Baptiste, who blinked at the surge of emotion and hugged him back.

Adieu.

The knight passed what strength he had left to the boy, expecting to dissolve into final oblivion, but instead everything lit up around him as if a helmet had been lifted from his head. The night was not dark anymore; it was made of midnight blue, with stars impossibly close. And the trees ... the swaying trees were whispering about a ship becalmed, surrounded by fog.

At last, the flame had been passed to a fresh candle, and now ... now he was free to go anywhere. He smiled at the boy and nodded at the collection of cats and ravens. Then he turned on his heel and disappeared down the path, heading northwest to the edge of the sea. There he stopped and turned, waiting for the silver disk to tumble out of its darkness and lay a glittering path over the Atlantic.

Everyone knows ghosts cannot cross water. Not unless they have a boat, or a ship, or dare to walk on water.

CHAPTER 20

“**W**HAT’S he writing?” Munin hissed and sidled over to his twin brother. We were picnicking in the pine grove below the gazebo, hidden from the view of nosy humans and opportunistic gulls. Through the trees I could see the ripples of an incoming tide. I tilted my head up and closed my eyes. All around us the air smelled of sap and ferns and ocean. I filled my lungs with it, wishing it could be bottled up and transported to Saskatchewan. Only one more week of summer on Talon Island. I sighed and returned to the task at hand.

“I am updating my journal to make sure I did not miss anything important,” I explained.

“It looks almost full,” Hugin observed and took another bite of sourdough.

“I know, and I can’t even use any of it,” I despaired. *The Destiny Observer*, my hometown’s newspaper, had a competition for the best summer-holiday story. The prize was \$100, which I could put in the house fund. My parents had asked me how I would like it if we moved to Talon Island for good, and they took my excited yelling as a yes.

“Why?” Hugin’s question brought me back to reality. I leafed through the journal and selected the most bizarre story of all. I cleared my throat and started reading out loud.

“For example:

Ralf Kaspar, a German baker from Chester, was sitting in his boat sipping homemade root beer. He was dressed in a Saxon costume, which consisted of a horned helmet and a braided wig, to help him perfect the herbal concoction he planned to call Valkyrie. The total eclipse of the moon was in slow progress when he dozed off peacefully, rocked by the waves. He woke up to the sounds of a ship advancing through the fog. He was scrambling to row out of the way when a white knight passed him by, hovering above the surface of the water. Ralf recalls hearing the ship's crew exclaim 'Ce terrible brouillard!' ('This awful fog!') and 'Mon dieu, c'est Jean Baptiste!' ('My god, it's Jean Baptiste!'). He then stuffed one braid of his wig into his mouth to keep quiet for fear of being noticed by what were undoubtedly French ghosts. Fortunately, when the moon was shining again, a strong wind picked up and blew the fog away, along with the apparitions. As he was crossing himself, a freak wave overturned the boat, washing Ralf onto Black Cove beach, where he climbed onto a couch and passed out. He was found the following morning by a local resident, Vivian Maelstrom, who was walking her dog. It was love at first sight."

"Is such a thing possible?" Hugin said to the world in general.

"It is, and there is even a famous precedent," Munin spread his wings, "in the Völsunga Saga. Didn't the hero Sigurd wake Brynhild the Valkyrie by removing her helmet?"

All three of us were quiet for a long moment while we imagined Ralf Kaspar in repose on a couch as a hairy Valkyrie. Then we burst out laughing.

"Apparently they are serious. I heard that Miss Maelstrom wants to sell her villa and be a tavern wench at Black Sails Bakery & Brewery," I shrugged and

suppressed irritation over the fact that our trip to Shut In Island had been postponed due to an invitation to the grand opening of the brewery, only to be cancelled entirely because of bad weather.

“Munin has been mooning over someone too,” Hugin whispered loudly.

“I have not!” Munin scowled.

“Her name is Ravenna, and she lives in Seabright,” Hugin managed to say before Munin pecked him viciously and started chasing him in a circle around me.

“Guys! I got it ... We could write a saga,” I waved my arms to scatter them.

“What did you say?” Munin hopped closer.

“A saga?” Hugin twitched excitedly.

It had been the ravens’ secret wish to appear in a heroic tale, only the Norse poets called skalds had gone extinct in the Middle Ages. We would just have to do it ourselves.

“I propose that we compose a sweeping epic that begins a thousand years ago with Clan Raven arriving in Canada and ends with ...”

“...and ends with Odin’s return as witnessed by Hugin and Munin of the 21st century,” Munin interjected.

“What?” I gaped at him.

“*He* is back,” said Hugin.

“Do you mean to say the god Odin has returned? Here, on Talon Island?” I asked and hastily looked for an empty page in my journal.

“I want to write this down. So ... how does Odin come back? Does he make a grand entrance in a big storm?”

The ravens exchanged an abashed look, and Munin said in a hushed voice, “He came back as a cat.”

I stopped writing and blinked at him.

"It's true. We were walking on the beach when we saw a yellow cat sitting on a rock, fixing us with one eye."

"I know that cat ..." I said quietly, thinking of the old tom who had arrived on our porch in a storm.

"It hypnotized Munin, who just sat there like a duck, drooling slightly."

"I did not drool!"

"Then the cat turned his terrible gaze onto me and it was as if my whole life passed before my eyes," Hugin said and shivered.

"Hugin started speaking in tongues," Munin chortled and then added in a serious tone, "I feared for his sanity."

"That's because I had just received a linguistic upgrade that included Mandarin Chinese, the most widely spoken form of Chinese in the world," Hugin defended himself. "I was experiencing a mental overload."

"So the god Odin is an old cat?" I asked for verification before recording it in my journal.

"He is a shape-shifter, and who suspects a cat of being anything more?" Munin shrugged.

"A perfect disguise," Hugin nodded. "He even fooled us."

"Indeed ... Do you think he will smite me for giving him a flea bath that one time?" I grinned and bit my lip.

"No, there is a real cat that needs looking after. Odin just borrowed its body. When he left the beach, he looked like an old man in a cloak."

"Phew," I wiped my forehead in feigned relief. I would not want to have started off on the wrong foot with someone of Odin's calibre, mythical being or not.

I hefted my journal, which was thick with my entries, newspaper clippings and a map as well as charcoal drawings of the ravens and Jean Baptiste done by Ariel to my specifications. If I could write an article about being

knighted at dawn by the ghost of a medieval warrior, it would not only win me first prize but would also turn Shut In Island into a Templar mecca.

I turned to a page with a postcard of Peggy's Cove glued to the paper. Here was something safe and verifiable to write about: a family visit to a famous lighthouse. Boring, boring, boring. There was no helping it; the best of my adventures would remain sealed in my journal in the false bottom of the rum-runner's trunk.

"There is still one loose end," I said out loud and turned to the ravens, who had moved to the sturdy pine tree resembling a trident. A hasty glance passed between them, but they kept silent.

"Why didn't the first lighthouse keeper look for the Templar treasure? He knew about it and yet he chose not to go after it," I said and tapped my chin with a pen.

"That's because Jimmy Raven did and never came back," Hugin rasped.

"Aha."

I wondered if there was a skeleton in the cavern under Shut In Island, the bones of its hand gripping a fistful of gold. How many other people had sought the treasure and died in the attempt? Given the level of secrecy maintained by the ravens and the near extinction of the band of L'nuk, I would say not many.

I looked at the poem again and filled in the last missing words:

*Take the oath or take the gold
Choose wrong and you shan't grow old*

Choosing gold meant forfeiting one's life, and I was relieved that I had taken the oath instead – the oath that bound me to the secret of Shut In Island for the rest of my life. I swallowed hard and closed the book.

Setting my journal aside, I split the remaining bread between the ravens. I knew they would take it to the forest behind the pyramid rock on the other side of Seal Cove and share it with their elders. They got ready to leave, smoothing their feathers edged with silver in the sun.

When I found myself alone, I climbed one of the thick branches of the pine, letting stray thoughts whirl like a dust dervish and finally settle at the bottom of my mind. This summer had been perfect, my stay on Talon Island a much wished for yet totally unexpected adventure. I had made friends, real and supernatural, and learned a great old secret that spanned over 700 years (more, if you counted Atlantis). Out there, rising from the ocean like a white mountain, was Shut In Island, a repository of clay jars filled with mercury to preserve a collection of ancient scrolls that, if revealed prematurely, could radically alter the course of human history.

"I am a librarian," I exclaimed and spread my arms theatrically. Then I fell out of the tree.

"I meant to do that," I told Henrietta the cat, who had arrived unseen. She squinted her eyes and flicked the end of her tail. If you say so, it said. She ambled over and sniffed at the tree, then proceeded to sharpen her claws on a slab of grey stone visible in the side of the hill. It had a roughly rectangular shape, like a narrow door, its edges obscured under an organic layer of dirt crisscrossed with roots. There was nothing unusual about it, but I followed Henrietta anyway, trusting her instincts more than I trusted mine.

"What do you see?" I asked, and she stood up on her hind legs, stretching her back and flexing her claws. With the aid of my pen, I disturbed the moss that gripped the granite, just enough to slide my fingers under it.

The cross was small and unadorned. Only its shape gave an inkling as to who was entombed inside the hill, and I would never betray his name.

Find the cross and you will find the sword. Find the sword and you will find me.

He had been here all this time, laid to his final rest under his sword, the last of the lost Templars. It must have been the L'nuk who buried him, respecting his last wish to remain anonymous yet identifiable should someone come to find him. He had never lost hope.

"I found you," I said quietly.

With great care I replaced the moss, hoping it would grow back and cover the entire stone. I knew that the spirit of Jean Baptiste de Saisi had moved on, although instead of heaven, he had chosen a ghost ship. I felt my fingertips tingle and the hair on the back of my neck rise.

Jean Baptiste would be back, and with him the entire ghostly crew of *La Templierie*.

EPILOGUE

“YOO-HOO!”
“Room service!”

The strange raspy voices were back. Chester Seaboyer rushed to the far corner of his stone prison and stood under the cross-shaped hole in the ceiling with his face upturned.

“One pizza for one gold coin,” said the one who called himself Monroe.

“What? That’s daylight robbery!” Chester exploded. He had already tried to eat his neoprene suit, unsuccessfully, and had contemplated drinking his own urine to stay alive. Fortunately there were mushrooms growing in the dank cave and surface water that dripped down the hole in the ceiling. He would stand under it with his mouth open, catching the precious liquid, until a bird dropping put an end to that. Yes, he was ravenously hungry and terribly thirsty, but he was not about to squander priceless Templar gold on mere pizza.

“Oops, the price has just gone up. One slice of pizza for one gold coin,” Hugh snickered nastily.

“Go stuff yourself!” Chester shook his fist. He would wring their necks if he could. They came almost every day, to taunt him and mock him relentlessly, like a pair of high-school students.

The sounds of someone eating pizza drove Chester into a frenzy.

“Here, you can have this for free,” Monroe said and dropped something down the hole.

Chester scrambled down and swept the cold stone floor with his hands. They closed around a dead mouse. What did they think he was, a raven?

“Is this a joke? You are friends of my nephew, aren’t you? All I did was dip him in the ocean a little. Boo hoo. Get me out of here at once, do you hear me?” he pounded his fist on stone.

“We only take orders from Sir Nick,” the voices said smugly.

Chester thought he had heard that name before, but the only face he could recall was that of that snotty kid with the stinky cat and the rabid dog. He rubbed his hand, which still bore the dog’s bite marks. It was getting more sore each day.

The voices were pure gibberish now, an odd mixture of what sounded like Norwegian and Chinese. On top of everything, his headache had returned. He knew how to silence the whispers in the dark. He walked over to the nearest pile of gold and started showering himself with it.

“Mine, it’s all mine! Hahahahaaa!”

Out in the sun, the ravens looked at each other and shrugged. They were not about to waste a perfectly good pizza on a raving lunatic. They could always come to collect their share of the gold at a more suitable time.



ἈτÞṚṚ



ΨṚṚṚ



*ṚṚṚ

ἈτÞṚṚ - Yngvi

ΨṚṚṚ - Munin

*ṚṚṚ - Hugin

GLOSSARY

adieu – goodbye or farewell in French

Al Capone – an infamous American gangster from Chicago during the Prohibition era

Alexandria – a coastal city in Egypt founded by Alexander the Great and home to the ancient Royal Library of Alexandria

Atlantis – a mythical prehistoric civilization whose island was swallowed by the ocean

Christopher Columbus – an Italian explorer who discovered America in 1492 for the Spanish monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand

cross pattée – a cross with arms wide at the end and narrow at the centre

Davy Jones's locker – Davy Jones was believed to be an evil spirit of the sea; to be gone to Davy Jones's locker meant to have drowned at sea

drakkar – a Viking long ship suitable for both seas and rivers and equipped with oars and a sail

drifting – a Japanese driving and racing technique that involves driving at a slip angle with the rear of the car seemingly out of control yet managing to go around corners at a high speed in chase of other drifters

fostri – foster brothers (in Old Norse)

fylgja (pl. *fylgjur*) – a mythical being that can take on human or animal forms and whose presence is an omen, good or bad

gesundheit – a German expression used to wish someone good health

gros tournois – a medieval silver coin with a *cross pattée*

Guten Tag! – a German greeting (good day)

Henry Sinclair – Earl of Orkney and Baron of Roslin, a Scottish nobleman believed by some to have sailed to Nova Scotia in 1398

Hugin and **Munin** – the Norse god Odin's ravens whose names mean Thought and Memory

Indiana Jones – an American movie series about a history professor who is also adept at treasure seeking

Je ne parle pas français – I do not speak French

Klondike – a region in the Yukon famous for the gold rush in the late 1800s

Knights Templar – a religious military order formed after the First Crusade to protect Christian pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem

L'nui'sin – language of the L'nuk

L'nuk (sing. **L'nu**, adj. **L'nuwey**) – native people also referred to as Mi'kmaq

medicine man – a native healer

Mi'kmaq – native people of the Atlantic provinces and Quebec

Morse code – a signalling system invented in the 1840s that uses combinations of short (.) and long (–) pulses, sounds or flashes to send a message such as SOS (a distress signal)

nirvana – a state of spiritual bliss (in Buddhism)

Non nobis solum, sed omnibus – Not for us, but for everyone (a motto derived from the writings of Marcus Tullius Cicero, a Roman philosopher)

Odin – the chief god in Norse mythology and the father of Thor

Ouroboros – a symbol of cyclical renewal or re-creation portrayed as a snake eating its own tail

Plato – a Greek philosopher and mathematician and a student of Socrates

privateer – a government-approved pirate

Prohibition – an era during which it was illegal to produce, distribute or sell alcohol

rum-running or **bootlegging** – the smuggling of illegal alcohol

runes – the letters of the Old Norse alphabet; also used as magical symbols for rune casting

saga – a story from Norse lore and history

Saxons – Germanic tribes

scrying – looking into an object such as a crystal ball to obtain visions or to foretell the future

shaman – a spiritual healer and mediator between the world of the living and the spirit realm

Sheba – the queen of Sheba (a biblical monarch)

Sie sind Deutsch? – Are you German?

Sir Lancelot – a knight of King Arthur's Round Table

skald – a Norse poet

surcoat – an outer garment, such as a tunic, worn over medieval armour

The Poetic Edda – a collection of heroic and mythological poems from the 13th-century Icelandic manuscript *Codex Regius*

Thor – the Norse god of thunder, which he makes by throwing his hammer (*Mjölnir*)

Valhalla – a heavenly hall where slain warriors feast until Ragnarök, the end of the world

Valkyrie – a powerful female figure in Norse mythology who takes slain heroes to Valhalla

wrecking – the salvaging of cargo from foundered ships, sanctioned or illegal

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WRITING is a solitary, introverted process at the end of which one is faced with passing the blotchy manuscript hesitantly to the most trusted person on the outside for judgment. In my life this person is my loving husband, Tim, who encouraged me to keep writing and who quietly took over the kitchen when I found no time to cook. He alone knows all the grains of truth in this story, and he can attest to the fact that there truly was a waterlogged couch on the beach and a ghost rattling the latch of the linen closet. I bow to him with deep gratitude.

Swords, Templars and the ways of a peaceful warrior are the domain of my brother Erik Nadudvari. What started as a question about a sword against an iron poker evolved into a lengthy discussion about the inner life of warriors and the spirit of their weapons. To him I dedicate the character of Uncle Bo, who is waiting for us in the shadow of a medieval castle in Nicky's third adventure.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALESSANDRA Nadudvari lives in Nova Scotia, Canada, only a few miles from Oak Island. Intrigued by its mystery and the possibility of a transatlantic voyage made by the medieval Knights Templar, she wrote an adventure story for her son. When the family's cats and backyard ravens heard about the tale, they wanted to be in it too. The story grew, until there were enough pages for a small book ...